



# A Pair of Originals

*A STORY BY E. WARD*







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A PAIR OF ORIGINALS







ASKING THE WAY.

*Frontispiece.*

# A Pair of Originals

*A STORY*

BY

E. WARD

AUTHOR OF "FRESH FROM THE FENS"

*WITH ILLUSTRATIONS*

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## CHAPTER I

“THE fact of the case is, I’m about tired of everything.”

The author of this comprehensive statement was a small boy of five summers, who was curled up on the rug by the nursery fire, looking pretty comfortable notwithstanding his lofty contempt of his surroundings. His companion was a brother two years his senior, who was nursing his knees in an old-fashioned attitude, his small and rather wizened face turned intently towards the ruddy blaze.

“Yes, Curly, that’s exactly how I feel sometimes. I’m about tired of everything. I suppose we’re what the girls call *blasé*. I think that means pretty much what we feel now.”

“I don’t know about that—I don’t expect we feel much like the girls,” answered the younger brother, with masculine contempt for the “inferior sex.” “I’d rather be us than the girls any day; but I do want something fresh to do.”

“If we were boys in books, we would get into

mischief, and make a jolly big row about something ; but I don't believe any one here would care if we did. And there doesn't seem anything to do."

"I don't much believe in book-boys," remarked Curly, whose forte appeared to be a general contempt for most things. "Of course anyone could make anybody do anything in a book ; but it doesn't prove that one could do it oneself."

"No, that's just it—I feel like that myself, sometimes. Now if we were book-boys we should find heaps of things to do, and we should be awfully pleased we weren't going to have any more govern-ess till after the summer was over. I did think it was jolly when I first heard about it ; but I declare I should sometimes like to have some lessons again, just for a change."

"Oh, well, I don't think I care about lessons so much ; but I want something to happen different. I'm sick of all the days being so alike. I wish we lived in the country. We could do such a lot of things there."

"Ah, yes, wouldn't that be jolly ! But we never do go till August, and then it's generally to a stupid, fashionable place. It's fun digging in the sand ; but I should like to go where the fields are all green, and the birds build nests, and people have hay and corn to get in, and all that sort of thing. When I'm big, I think I'll be a farmer. I'm sure I won't

be a soldier, or a barrister, or a clergyman, or any of the stupid things the men are who come here to talk nonsense to the girls and make themselves ridiculous."

Curly looked into the fire and gravely nodded his head.

"I'll come with you, and we'll have a farm together ; but, Bunny, do you think papa will let us? Wasn't it because Tor went to Australia to be a farmer that they are all so angry with him?"

Bunny's shrewd little brown face was screwed up into an expression of profound wisdom.

"I don't quite know why it is that they are all so cross to Tor. I think it's because he failed and had to come home again. If he had got rich and come home with a big fortune, I don't expect they'd have minded half as much."

"I like Tor the best of them all," remarked Curly, with an air of decision. "I wonder if he seems nicer because we can't remember him before he went away."

"I can—just a very little," said Bunny. "At least I can remember a little bit about the fuss there was, and how angry everybody was; but I was too little to understand what it was all about, and you weren't much more than a baby."

"Well, I don't believe Tor ever did anything very naughty. I think it's a great shame how they

all go on at him. I say, Bunny, we'll go and sit in his room when they've all gone down to dinner."

"Perhaps he'll go down too—he does sometimes."

"He won't to-night, 'cause the girls are having a lot of people. Cook told me so her own self. Tor never goes down when they have a party—he is much too sensible. He doesn't care about the silly people the girls like to have dangling about."

"I wish he'd have a house of his own, or a farm, and let us live with him. We're rather alike in some ways, I think; nobody seems to want us, or care for us."

"Yes," answered Curly, "I suppose it is just about that. I wish Tor would take us away, and we would have a nice home of our own somewhere else, with no girls ever bothering round. I should like that. Suppose we ask Tor about it to-night. He might like it, too. I should think he would."

Bunny shook his wise little head, as if he thought it doubtful whether Tor would rise to any such suggestion, but at least there could be no harm in trying, and it was something to think about meantime.

And how came it that these two little boys, surrounded as they were by the luxuries of a handsome London house, and with a wealthy father living beneath the same roof, should have already got it into their heads that there was no place for

them there, and that it would be a good thing to go elsewhere, rather than stay on, where, as they pathetically put it, "nobody cared for them"?

Well, the facts of the case were these: Sir Ronald Chesterton was a wealthy baronet, who had been twice married. When very young he had, against the wishes of his mother, wooed and won a very lovely girl with a fortune of her own, but also with the extravagant tastes that often accompany the possession of wealth; and they had led a very gay life throughout the years that she lived, bringing up their large and handsome family in a way that was very pleasant to those concerned, though hardly a guarantee for the future, as they contracted expensive, careless habits and knew nothing of judicious control. And even the father began to find out that there was something amiss in his code of government, for after the death of his first wife he married after a short interval (to the great disgust of his family) the governess who had been engaged to train up his handsome daughters, and who had found the task by no means an easy one.

The lot of the second Lady Chesterton had been no bed of roses. If she had had trouble with the great girls and boys whilst she had them in the school-room only, she found it ten times more difficult to manage them when she was in the place

of step-mother; and indeed the life she led was such a hard and anxious one, that when her second little boy was born she slipped quietly away from life and its cares, leaving her husband a widower for the second time, with two young children in addition to the large family he had found such a care before.

But it was useless to complain; and indeed his daughters soon assured him that he need have no anxiety on their account, as they were well qualified to take care both of the household and of themselves. There were five of them—the youngest of whom had just come out, though not quite seventeen, her sisters finding it impossible to keep her in obscurity any longer, and not much desiring it either, for they were all on very good terms together. So that the father found his household ruled and regulated in a way that it seemed useless to resist, though he felt his friends pitied him for having five mistresses instead of one, and wondered that he did not obtain the services of some relative or chaperon, to keep an eye on the vagaries of these handsome, high-spirited, self-willed daughters of his. His sons were afloat in the world—one in the army, another in the diplomatic service, and another at the bar. But notwithstanding their avocations, they contrived to be much at home, and the house was quite a centre for gaieties of all kinds, carried on by

the young people with small regard for the father, whose Parliamentary duties left him but little time to spare for the regulation of his household.

With a household so constituted, it may well be understood that the position of the two little children shut up in the far-away nursery was somewhat isolated and dreary. The sisters considered them as a needless encumbrance, and a reminder of an episode in their father's history which they would have preferred to forget. The big brothers hardly saw them from one week's end to another; even the father often passed several days without contriving a visit to the nursery; and now the governess had deserted them, for she had fallen ill of typhoid fever, which would of necessity keep her from her post for at least three months; and so the good-natured sisters, who wished to be kind to her, and to rid themselves at the same time of the "nuisance of having a governess at the luncheon-table every day," had decreed that the children should do without any regular teaching till after the summer holidays, and that the governess should have her salary just the same.

"For she will want it more than ever, poor thing, if she is ill," said Miss Chesterton. "But we could not pay it twice over; it would throw the accounts all wrong. She shall have it, and we will let the children have a holiday. I am sure it will do them

no harm. They can work all the harder by and by to make up for it."

"Yes," was the eager reply of Georgina—or Georgy, as she was invariably called—"and we certainly don't want to bother papa about another governess, just when he is so much worried over Tor. I'm sure we ought to do everything we can to keep him from anything that can vex or harass him in any way."

And so it came about that on this chilly April evening the two little brothers had arrived at the conclusion that they had got to the end of everything, and were beginning to wish even for a governess by way of varying the monotony of their nursery lives.

Yet they were an original pair of children, and would have attracted notice and admiration in some homes—Bunny for his shrewd, old-fashioned remarks and the acuteness of his observation, and Curly on account of his great beauty and remarkable forwardness. Curly was indeed a very handsome boy. He was quite as tall and a good deal stronger than his elder brother, though his strength was not quite under his own control yet, and a certain amount of laziness seemed to go with his rapid growth and development. He had the loveliest golden hair, which was not cut short like his brother's, but hung in natural curls round his handsome little face, just touching

his shoulders. It was his hair that had won for him the nickname by which he was universally known, though he had been christened Stuart; whilst Bunny, whose baptismal name was Francis, had been so called because he was so small and brown and light that his mother had likened him to a rabbit, and the cognomen had stuck to him.

Bunny suddenly lifted his head with a listening air.

“They’re going down to dinner, Curly; let’s go and watch them.”

Hand in hand the two little brothers slipped from the room, and ran softly down the uncarpeted stairs that led to their own special domain. They did not often penetrate lower into the house by the front staircase, for if they chanced to meet one of “the girls” on the way, they would be certain to be turned back with a sharp rebuke, and bidden to keep to their own quarters. But on party nights there was no such danger to be apprehended, and the little boys had a corner of their own, which commanded an excellent view of the stream of guests as they descended to the dining-room on dinner-party nights. This sight had for them—as for most children—a great fascination, and they looked eagerly downwards to see the gay couples go by. Dinner-parties in a house that numbered five girls and one or two sons practically at home had to be on a rather large scale, and it was very amusing

watching the company file in, and passing comments all the time.

"I say, Ethel has got a new dress, a regular stunner; and Carry is making *such* eyes at the fellow she is talking to. He looks like a lamp-post with arms and legs stuck on. Look at Madge: doesn't she laugh loud? I expect Miss will scold her for that by and by. She will tell her people will think her a tomboy."

"Miss," pure and simple, was a sort of nickname the little boys had adopted to designate their eldest half-sister, the dignified Miss Chesterton, who held herself a good many degrees higher than her sisters, and made the most of her position as head of her father's house.

Curly's eyes were eagerly fixed on the descending crowd.

"Tor isn't there," he said, hardly heeding Bunny's remarks and criticisms, which continued to flow forth uninterruptedly; "I didn't think he'd go down. Now we could go and see him, and ask him about the farm. I wonder if they'll send him any dinner. We might make raids, and have fun, if only he's in a nice mood."

"If he has a headache, as he mostly has, he won't care to be bothered with us," rejoined Bunny. "But we can go and see, if you like. It would be something to do."

The dinner company had now passed out of sight, and a great clattering and chattering was all that could be heard from below.

“Talk about children making a noise,” remarked Bunny, contemptuously. “Why, just listen to the row grown-ups kick up the moment they begin to feed. It’s like the animals at the Zoo. If *we* made half such a racket, the girls would make a regular shine about it. They are silly, conceited things. They think everything they do is right, and everything anybody else does wrong.”

“I suppose that’s the way girls are made,” was Curly’s philosophical answer. “Perhaps they can’t help it, poor things.”

“Well, perhaps not. I wouldn’t be a girl for something. Now let’s go to Tor.”

So the little brothers rose from their stooping position and remounted some of the stairs, turning down a passage at the top, and walking along a matted corridor till they reached a door at the end, at which Curly boldly knocked. He had to knock twice before he got any answer, and then it came rather as a growl than an articulate speech; but they took it as a permission, and went in together.

They found themselves in a good-sized room, with a smaller dressing-closet beyond, through the open door of which glimpses could be obtained of a narrow camp-bed and a small washing-stand. The

bigger room had more the air of a parlour than a bedroom, and there was a bright fire burning there, though except for that the place was quite dark, the curtains drawn so as to exclude the waning daylight, whilst the gas had not been lighted, nor even a candle.

On a couch drawn up to the fire in such a way as to leave his face in deep shadow was stretched the tall figure of a man. The length of limb and great breadth of shoulder seemed to indicate unusual physical power and strength, whilst the languor of the posture and the darkness and silence of the room seemed to negative this supposition and suggest the idea of ill-health and sickness.

The little boys, however, appeared quite used to this aspect of the case, and made no comment as they advanced into the circle of the ruddy firelight.

"They're having one of their stupid old dinner-parties downstairs to-night," remarked Curly by way of prelude. "We thought you'd be all alone, as you hadn't gone down; so we came to see you. We thought perhaps you'd be lonely. Besides, we wanted to talk to you out of our own heads."

"Well, so long as you talk out of any head but mine, I don't object particularly."

This answer came in low, languid tones, as if the speaker was either too tired or too indifferent to raise any protest against this intrusion. So the

children squatted down on the rug and prepared for a sociable discussion.

“We’re so tired of everything, Tor,” began Curly, who was very full of his grievance. “There isn’t anything left to do that we’ve not done heaps and heaps of times before, and nobody wants us, and we don’t want nobody either.”

“Ah, we’re pretty much in the same boat, you and I,” answered the young man, in his deliberate way. “We’re all rather superfluous articles in this house, it seems; only unluckily there does not seem any way of escape just at present.”

“I think I could escape if I tried,” remarked Curly. “We haven’t got any governess now, so we can do as we like all day; only there isn’t anywhere to escape to—unless you would buy a farm and let us live with you. I think we should be very useful. Boys can be, you know, because of the Swiss Family Robinson. Those boys did lots of things.”

“We were wondering if you would have a farm in England now that you’ve come back from Australia,” responded Bunny, as if in answer to an interrogatory sound from Tor. “Curly and I are so tired of living in London. We thought it would be so nice if we could get away somewhere with you and have a nice place of our own. I think we should make it pay,” he concluded, shaking his head wisely. “You see, you have had experience, and I

feel sure I should take to it. I have always wanted to be cast on a desert island, and one would have to be a sort of farmer there. I should quite like to dress in sheepskins, and then one would have no clothes to buy."

"And we should grow our own corn and have our own animals to eat, so there wouldn't be anything at all to buy. If we had a farm, Tor, I believe we could live on nothing—"

"And make our fortunes, too. Oh, Tor, don't you think we might try? I'm sure you must be sick of London and the shindies the girls are always kicking up."

There was no direct answer, only a sound between a laugh and a groan. Bunny, whose eyes were growing used to the darkness, looked into his brother's face, and remarked in his shrewd way,

"I don't think your head would ache so much out in the country. Is it very bad to-night?"

"No, not worse than usual. It never will be right in this detestable place, where there is nothing but racket from morning to night."

"Then why don't you go away somewhere else?"

"It takes money to do that, young 'un, and I haven't got any."

"Why don't you ask papa?"

"Because he is angry enough with me as it is, without giving him extra bother; and when a fellow

is in dire disgrace, he is not supposed to want favours, or to have the impudence to make requests of any kind."

"Why are you in disgrace?" asked Curly. "Is it because you went to Australia to be a farmer?"

"First because I went, and now because I have come home again. It's hard to please everybody, isn't it, Curly?"

"I suppose if you'd come home rich they wouldn't have minded so much?" questioned Bunny, sagely. "If you had come back with a big fortune and lots of diamonds, the girls would have made a great fuss of you, and nobody would have been cross. It does seem a pity you couldn't do that, Tor."

"Instead of losing all I had given me, and bringing home nothing but myself and a sun-stroke. Well it would have been a superior arrangement, certainly; only, you see, luck didn't fall in my way."

"I can't think, all the same, why you came home," remarked Bunny. "I wouldn't have done it if I'd been out there."

"I had no choice, you see. They shipped me off when I knew nothing about it, and wired over that I was coming; and when I got ashore, there was my aggrieved parent, ready to take possession of me. And here I am, a useless fixture, too old to enter any respectable service, and with no head to take to any

gentlemanly profession. It's no wonder they are disgusted with me. I must be a horrid incubus."

Curly's eyes opened wide with admiration and envy.

"*Are you?*" he asked with an access of respect. "How nice that must be! I wish I was one too. We're nothing but a plague—at least the girls say so."

"The girls tell us a good many home-truths, don't they? But it is a shame to fall foul of you two little chaps. You have never given them cause to abuse you. You have never done any harm."

"Oh yes, but we have," answered Curly, with a certain amount of complacency. "We hid away all their best hats one day, when they were going to an awfully swell party, and there was no end of a rumpus about it, I can tell you; but it was jolly fun all the same. And once we dressed up their pug-dogs in their bracelets and necklaces, and turned them into the drawing-room when they were having a lot of fellows to tea; but they weren't as cross as we expected about that, till they found one pearl had been lost. And once"—here Curly lowered his voice to a whisper, a look of awe creeping over his face—"once, after we had seen the gas-men doing something to the meter, we got the key, and Bunny turned it off at the main in the middle of a dinner-party. But papa was there then, and he was very

angry, and he whipped us both, so we never did it again."

Tor laughed at this recital of childish misdemeanours. The little boys liked telling things to Tor, because he never scolded or tried to point a moral like the governess or "Miss," neither did he seem bored by their conversation as the other brothers and the sisters were.

"But you see, even if we do funny things sometimes, it isn't like having a settled occupation," said Bunny. "Now if you had that farm of yours, we should always have plenty to do—and it would be so nice to get out of this horrid old London."

"Well, if your hearts are so set on that, why don't you go and pay a visit to our respected grandmother? She has a farm, and she lives in the country, and for aught I know she might like to see you. Have you never been there yet? I went once when I was a small boy, and very much I liked it. I hit it off very well, too, with the old lady; but none of the others ever cared to go near her."

Bunny and Curly exchanged glances. This was certainly quite a new idea, and not an unattractive one on the whole.

"I never thought of that. I've heard the girls say they will never go there again, it is so dull and stupid. Is she our grandmother too? She hasn't ever asked us to go and see her, I don't think."

“That is hardly her way. She is not like the fond grandmothers of fiction,” answered Tor, lazily. “She is an old lady of great character, and she is so unreserved in the expression of her opinions that she generally manages to quarrel with most people, or at least to offend them mortally in some way or another. That is why there is so little interchange of civility between our houses. She disapproved of my mother because she was too go-ahead, and of yours because she was too stay-at-home. And she never was known to ask any of us to her house. I was sent because the rest were ill one year, and I thought, as we were such good friends, that she would ask me again some day; but she never did. If the girls go, it is because they are sent, out of motives of policy or propriety, and she never declines to receive her son’s children, and she is hospitable in her way. But if you want to go, you must just take the bull by the horns; for you will never get an invitation.”

Both children were staring intently at the speaker. They were so much taken by this new idea that they could think of nothing else.

“Do you mean that we must go without telling her? But won’t she be angry?”

“And perhaps the girls won’t let us go,” suggested Bunny. “I’m as sure as I can be that Miss would just say ‘No’ straight down, and there would

be the end of it. Oh, Tor, what shall we do? It would be so nice. Can't you advise us?"

"Suppose you just cut and run," was the laconic answer.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, just put on your best clothes, and make up a bundle big enough to carry you over the first night, and cut away to the train—I'll pay your fares and set you in the way of getting there safely—and just turn up at the old lady's and say you've come to stop, because you've got no governess, and hate being in London, and think it high time you should make her acquaintance. If she keeps you, well and good; your other things can be sent after you, all in due time. If she doesn't, you will have had the fun of running away, and I'll tell them I put you up to it."

The children's eyes were glistening brightly.

"Oh, Tor, what a lovely idea! But won't you come too?"

Tor shook his head.

"But wouldn't you like to? Wouldn't you like to get out of all the noise and racket, and have a nice time in the country? Oh, do come. It would be so much nicer if you did. Are you quite sure you don't want to?"

"No, but I'm quite sure that I can't. I'm too old to take French leave like a youngster, especially

when I am in disgrace, and should be a nuisance in any house I stayed in. No, no; I'll put you up to getting there, and keep them quiet at this end—though I don't know if they would care much if the whole three of us were hopelessly lost—and you must do what you can with the old lady; and if you chance to play your cards well, you may have a very good time of it, perhaps, unless she's changed from when I knew her. But whatever you do, don't be afraid of her, not even when she snaps your head off. If you are, she will never care for you a straw; but if you hold your own, the chances are she will like you, and make you welcome to stay."

The two boys listened to these instructions with the most minute attention.

"I don't feel afraid now," said Curly, reflectively. "Shall I take my gun and shoot her?"

"It isn't a gun, it's only a pea-shooter," returned Bunny, "and it would be rude to shoot at an old lady. Though you can take it if you like. It might come in useful for other things."

And the child's face beamed silently at the thought of what he might accomplish when once he found himself in the enchanted land of the real country. Why had they never thought of paying grandmother a visit before?

"When may we go?" asked Curly, and both pairs of eyes were turned eagerly upon Tor, who

seemed to hold the fate of the expedition in his hands.

“As soon as you like, I suppose,” he answered negligently.

“To-morrow?” questioned Bunny with breathless eagerness.

“I suppose to-morrow would do as well as any other day, if it is to be a surprise.”

“Oh, how nice you are! The girls always make us wait ages and ages for anything, and we do so hate waiting. Can we really go to-morrow? And when may we start?”

“I should take an afternoon train, directly after dinner; then you won’t be missed for a long time. It’s not far by rail—only about an hour. You’ll get there in time for tea. I will tell you about the rail, and you can walk to the house. It’s only a mile and a quarter.”

“Are you sure you can afford to pay for our tickets? Because we have half-a-crown between us, and I thought you had no money.”

“Not enough to buy a farm, but enough to take you to Lady Chesterton’s. And now be off, for I don’t want to be bothered with you any more. You can come again in the morning, and I will tell you all you want to know.”

## CHAPTER II

“OH I say, Bunny, isn't this jolly? Fancy if we could have seen ourselves yesterday! Shouldn't we have stared?”

“Shouldn't we, just? I do like going in a train. I wish we didn't have to get out so soon. I'd like to go on all day.”

“Suppose we don't get out—suppose we go on just as far as ever it goes. P'raps we should get to the end of the world by-and-by. Then they'd never find us, and we should never have to go home any more.”

But Bunny shook his head.

“No, it wouldn't be like that. The train would have to stop when it got to the sea, and they'd find out we'd come too far, and send us back, and p'raps they'd make us pay a lot of money too. So we'd better do just as Tor told us to. Besides, I expect the guard will fetch us out at the right station. I saw Tor tipping him.”

“What's that?” asked Curly with interest.

“Oh, something that gentlemen do to make

people in a good temper," was Bunny's rather vague answer. "I've heard them say that porters and people will always do anything if only you tip them well."

"It was nice of Tor to take us to the station, and put us into this jolly carriage all by ourselves. None of the others would have done it. He's much the best of the whole boiling."

"Of course he is. I can't think why they're all so cross to him. I shall tell grandmother about him. I wish she'd tell him to come and see her. I believe he'd come—and it would be so jolly if he did. We could have such fun together."

"So we could, if his head didn't always ache."

"Oh, it wouldn't ache in the country. It's only because there is always such a row in London, and the girls are always having rackets all over the house. I'm sure he'd like to come. If grandmother is a bit nice, I'll tell her so."

"I wonder what she'll be like," remarked Curly, reflectively. "I think I shall call her Granny—it sounds more sociable, I think."

"Well, perhaps it does, if it doesn't make her cross; but I fancy she *is* rather cross, by what Tor said."

"Yes, I dare say she is. I expect she stands at the door of the farm, and bawls to the people what they're to do. I expect she wears a purple print

dress with white spots on it, and a big apron, and her sleeves all rolled up, and perhaps she has a black bonnet on her head, like the farmer's wife in 'Three Blind Mice.'"

Bunny's small brown face put on an expression of doubt and perplexity.

"Do you think she'll be like that, Curly? You know she's called Lady Chesterton, and she's papa's mother."

"I don't care what she's called nor what she is," was the sturdy answer. "Tor said she had a farm, and he's been there to see. And of course farmers' wives always do that sort of thing; and if she hasn't a husband-farmer she'll do it all the more. I expect she will wear big boots all covered with mud, and carry a big whip to drive the cows and the pigs. I'll go with her and help her. I'll carry the whip for her if she likes."

Bunny was silent. Evidently his small brother had pictured a very different sort of place from what he had fancied their grandmother's house would be; but then sometimes Curly made very happy guesses, and he might prove right after all. It was difficult to imagine that the girls would ever condescend to visit at a real farm-house, presided over by a mistress in a cotton gown and big boots; but then it was equally true that the girls never went willingly, but only if their father sent them,

and that they always came back very quickly, grumbling at the dulness of everything, and plainly in a bad temper with the grandmother. So there was no knowing what might be in store for them, and Curly might turn out to be right after all.

“Ladywell Priory—that’s what it’s called,” he said, referring to the paper in his hand. “I don’t think that sounds very much like a farm.”

“Tor said it was a farm, and he knows. Oh, I dare say some old monks lived there once, and then by-and-by that horrid old Cromwell came and turned them all out, and put pigs and cows and things to live there instead.” Curly’s views about history were a little vague, but he had a distinct impression that something of this kind had happened at some period. “Of course after that it would very likely get made into a farm. I hope it will look romantic. I wonder if there will be the ghost of an old monk walking about anywhere. I wonder if we should be frightened of him if there was.”

“I think ghosts have gone out of fashion now,” answered Bunny; “I don’t think they come except in books. And I don’t much fancy anything can be romantic now. I think things stopped being romantic about a hundred years ago, when all the Stuarts were killed or went away. I’m not quite sure, but I think it was about then. You know the Georges *couldn’t* be romantic, could they?”

Bunny was a great historian for his years, and was deeply read in a certain species of highly-spiced fiction, which dealt with far-back periods when children met with wonderful adventures, helped to upheave empires, and habitually performed prodigies of valour. It is true that both he and Curly felt a little natural distrust about the accuracy of some of the exploits of their favourites, and the younger boy sometimes professed a kind of contempt for the whole race of juvenile heroes, and declined to believe that they had ever done half the things with which they were credited; but on the whole they found extreme pleasure in feeding their imaginations on literature of this kind, and only regretted that it had not been their lot to live in times before chivalry and romance had died out. And one of the reasons which had made this visit to their grandmother so welcome was the hope that they might chance to find themselves in more romantic surroundings than they could command at home, or at the fashionable watering-places whither they were sometimes transported.

It was not long before the train drew up at the station they knew to be theirs, and the guard put his head in at the window, and helped them to alight. He spoke to a porter, who took them in charge, and led them out of the station, and told them which was the road that would take them to Ladywell Priory.

When the two little boys actually found themselves alone on a real country road, with the prospect of an adventure in the immediate future, their delight and exultation knew no bounds. They nipped one another by the hand, and Curly said,

“Bunny, do you feel at all afraid—the very least bit?”

And the answer was spoken with the utmost stoutness,

“No, not the very least.”

“Nor I. Oh, isn’t it jolly! I wonder what the old hag will say to us.”

“The what, Curly?”

Curly blushed, and hesitated a moment.

“Well, I said ‘the old hag.’ I heard Bernard call somebody that the other day—I think he meant Lady Prothero—and I thought it was such a nice name. I thought it might be nice to call grandmother by it—when we’re by ourselves, you know,” he added quickly, for he saw a look of disagreement on Bunny’s face.

“Well, you’d better not let her hear you, that’s all. If you do, we shall be packed straight off to London again.”

“Oh!” was all the response made by Curly. He had a great respect for his brother’s opinion, having often found it right when he had not expected it to be. He still held to his opinion that “old hag”

was a very endearing kind of epithet for an elderly lady, but if Bunny thought otherwise he would certainly be careful.

They began to look very narrowly about them now, for Tor had said it was not a long walk to the house; and though they had not much to carry, they thought it would be nice to see their journey's end. Every place that looked like a farm they thought must surely be the place; but everyone told them that Ladywell was still a little farther off, and when at last a rosy-cheeked market-woman actually pointed out the place to them from the summit of the little hill on the brow of which they were standing, Curly was quite sure that she had made a mistake, for that building looked more like a church than a house, and was not a bit like a farm.

"But I dare say it's quite near there," he remarked, after he had communicated his doubts to Bunny; and indeed, after they had gone a little farther, they saw that behind the house there were plenty of farm-buildings, and Curly nodded his head and looked about him in a sort of ecstasy, for of all delightful prospects in the world, surely there could be nothing so delightful as the idea of living at a farm-house.

It took a good while to get round to the farm-buildings, for, as Curly plaintively remarked, the stupid big house was so much in the way, with its

lodge-entrances and big gardens and shrubberies. But the little boys plodded patiently along till they had made a half-circle round it, and found themselves at length at the farm-entrance.

Curly squeezed his brother's hand tight, and uttered a little exclamation of delight. Yes, it was all just as he had pictured, only ten times more delightful when clothed with the garb of reality. There were the big gates opening into a sort of outer yard, with cowsheds and pigstyes in long ranges all round them, and beyond that the great stack-yard—only the children did not know its right name—in which innumerable hens and chickens were running about, the mother-hens with their young broods delighting the hearts of the children beyond all expression. There were few people about, for it was the hour of the men's tea, and the place was almost deserted, save for the animals themselves; but that did not matter to the boys, who were in no particular hurry to encounter their grandmother. Indeed Curly suggested in a whisper that they should sleep in one of the barns, or under a haystack, and not present themselves till next morning. There was a flavour of wild dissipation about such a plan that appealed to his youthful imagination, but Bunny shook his wise little head, and said that it would be silly, and that there would be no point in it.

Now Curly often wondered in secret what could be the meaning of that mysterious phrase, so often used by his elders, and what was the point they seemed to think so all-important; but he was in the stage of development when such questions are seldom asked, and not even to Bunny would he betray his ignorance. So, though he thought that in this case they would be much more comfortable without a point than with one, he never demurred at the decision of his senior, and only contented himself by murmuring that it would not be *his* fault if grandmother were cross and packed them back that night. *He* would have made sure of at least one night in the country.

By this time they had cautiously crossed the first yard, and made their way half through the second. The tameness of the little yellow chickens delighted them, and Curly actually succeeded in picking one up in his hand, to the great annoyance of its mother, who looked half disposed to peck the sturdy legs of the small intruder. However, she was pacified when the little squeaking, fluttering thing was restored to her, and the children pursued their way, feeling very much as if they were in a dream.

They didn't know in the least which way to go, and could see no sign of the farm-house itself. There were two pretty cottages just outside, and there were plenty of buildings all about them; but

they could not see anything that accorded with their preconceived ideas of a real old farm, and they would almost have welcomed the sight of the redoubtable grandmother, in the big boots and gaiters, brandishing the big whip, as Curly had imagined her doing.

“Somebody *must* live here,” he remarked below his breath. “I wonder where they have all gone to. Oh, there is an old man, with a pitchfork in his hand. Let’s go and ask him where the farm is.”

So hand in hand the little brothers advanced—Curly full of curiosity, and happily free from misgivings, whilst Bunny began to see that things were not going to be quite as his brother had pictured them, and was not quite certain that they might not be ordered off the place as common trespassers.

Anxious to propitiate the old man by politeness, Bunny pulled off his cap, and Curly did the same.

“If you please, sir,” began the elder brother, “can you tell us the way to the farm-house?”

“Eh, what? What farm-house? There ain’t no farm-house close round here.”

“Oh but there is!” cried Curly, impetuously. “We know there is, because our grandmother lives in it—and we’ve come to see her.”

The old man scratched his head, which seemed to Curly such a nice way of relieving his impatience that he immediately did the same.

“And who may your gran’mother be, young gen’lemen?” asked the countryman, with a perplexed glance at the trim little London-dressed children. “You don’t look much like farm-folks, I’m thinking.”

Curly would have launched into long explanations, but Bunny kept to the point by answering,

“Our grandmother is called Lady Chesterton, and she lives at a house called Ladywell Priory, and we’ve come to see her, only we can’t find her house.”

“Oh, if it’s Madam you’ve come after, you’re right enow,” was the more respectful answer; “this is her farm, sure enow, and you can get to the house this way if you’ve a mind. You go through the stable-yard there, and you’ll see a red door at the far end. That’ll take you straight into the kitchen-garden, and you’ll get out of that to the house all safe.”

“Thank you very much,” answered Bunny, politely; and nipping any farther confidences on the part of his little brother, he took his hand and marched off in the direction indicated.

The stable-yard was soon found; but there was such a nice sound of stamping feet and munching and rattling that the children found it hard to tear themselves away. One door stood open, giving an enchanting glimpse of the interior of a stable, and the backs of the sleek, shining horses; but Bunny made straight for the red door at the end, and when

they had got through it they found themselves in a big garden, with walls all round, in which all sorts of vegetables were growing, as well as such masses of spring flowers as quite to take their breath away.

Against one of the long walls stood a range of glass houses, from the walls and roofs of which the sun was glancing with dazzling brilliance; indeed it was all so bright and sunny and quiet that the little boys were growing actually bewildered, and quite prepared to fancy themselves in an enchanted country where everybody was asleep. They had seen nobody so far except the old countryman, and this place appeared as solitary as the yards they had left. But just as they had reached this conclusion, and were wondering what step to take next, a door in one of the glass houses suddenly opened, and out stepped a young girl—that is to say, a young lady possibly twenty years old, so that she was hardly young in the sight of the children—who advanced upon them, carrying a large basket of flowers in her hands, and looking as bright and fresh as one of her own blossoms, in her pretty, dainty dress, that seemed as if it might have been woven in a fairy-loom.

When she saw the two little boys she stopped still a moment in surprise, and then smiled at them very gaily and brightly.

“Well, you little trespassers, and what are you

doing here? Have you got in by accident and lost your way? I do not think you belong to the neighbourhood; do you?"

The boys had bared their heads again, and Curly's golden locks were reflecting back the glory of the declining sun in a most picturesque fashion.

"You beautiful little viking, do tell me who you are," said the young lady, approaching with every intention of kissing him; but to this overture Curly showed no intention of responding, and drawing back in a very ungallant fashion, he said,

"Oh, bother! don't do that! We've got too many girls at home. We came away to get away from them chiefly. They are such a bore."

A ringing laugh was the answer; and Bunny, who felt rather ashamed of his brother's frankness, hastened to add,

"Our girls aren't a bit like you—I wish they were; but Curly is too young to discriminate. We have run away to see our grandmother. She is called Lady Chesterton, and people say she lives here; but we can't find the house. I'm afraid we have got into your garden by mistake."

"Oh, this is delightful!" cried the young lady. "Have you really come to see us? Oh no, you have made no mistake. This is the right place, though not the usual entrance. Now you must tell me all about yourselves, and how you came to run away.

I was just wishing for some playfellows. You have come in the very nick of time."

Bunny was perplexed, for he could not imagine who this young lady was who seemed so very much at home in their grandmother's house. He did not remember ever having heard about her—but then he never listened when the girls were talking—and he knew she could not be an aunt, or Tor would have told them. He certainly thought the old lady lived alone, so perhaps this was only a visitor.

Curly was feeling a good deal aggrieved and disgusted.

"We didn't come here to play with girls—we want to help with the farm," he remarked.

"And so you shall, you little duck. I'm a great farmer myself, and I help grandmother with managing everything. You shall help us both; there is plenty for everybody to do. Now tell me all about it, and how you came to run away. There will be plenty of time to hear all about it before we get to the house."

Curly began to thaw from his first displeasure, and to feel more disposed to tolerate this unexpected intruder. She upset his calculations a good deal, but after all perhaps she might turn out to have some sense. At any rate, they were quite willing to tell her their story, and they both told it together with great eloquence and good-will.

The young lady showed a good deal of talent in being able to take it in in that disjointed fashion, but she turned from one to the other, and seemed to understand what each was saying; and before they had come in sight of the house she seemed almost like an old friend, so fully did she sympathise with them in their desire to get away from London and out into the fresh country.

“Well, I know what I think about it. I think you are very sensible little boys, and that you deserve a good long holiday; and if the grandmother thinks as I do, you shall have plenty of fun and farming before you are packed back home again.”

“Is she your grandmother too?” asked Bunny, with his usual wish to get at the bottom of a mystery.

“No, not really; but I call her Granny, for want of a better name. She is really no relation; but she is my guardian, and so I live with her. Granny and I are great friends; so you will have an ally on your side, you see.”

Curly's face fell somewhat. He had no intention of being rude, but he was of the age when there did not seem any reason against saying just what came into his head.

“Oh, do you live there? I didn't know that.”

“You don't seem to be very pleased.”

“ Well, no, I’m not. Part of the fun of coming away was to live in a house where there weren’t any girls.”

The young lady laughed merrily.

“ Well, we must see what we can do to remedy that defect. At least you need not call me by a girl’s name, if that will be any comfort to you.”

Both boys looked at her inquiringly.

“ What is your name ? ” asked Bunny.

“ Phyllis Musgrave ; but you can call me Phyl,— as some more little boys of my acquaintance do,— and I think we shall soon be such friends that you will be able to forget that I am anything so horrid and useless as a girl.”

And Bunny was chivalrous enough to remark thoughtfully,

“ Oh, I dare say you aren’t a bit like our girls— I’m sure you’re not. I suppose there must be some nice girls in the world, to turn into the ladies for the knights to fight about and rescue. Curly, suppose we don’t count her as a girl ; she might be a fair maiden or a distressed damsel—you know you said the other day that you should like to find one.”

“ Yes, if she was tied to a tree, and had a dragon with claws and a tail just going to eat her up,” answered Curly, who was not going to be caught in the trap too easily. “ I should like her then ; but *she* isn’t a bit like that.”

“Never mind, little viking, we will find something almost as attractive as a dragon one of these days, and you will no doubt have the chance of doing many doughty deeds. And now there is the house, and grandmother sitting out on the terrace. She is a wonderful old lady, as you will soon find out; not many ladies of seventy would care to have tea out of doors in April. And now you must come and be introduced, for you know you have taken us unaware—just as the knights of the olden times always did.”

Just as Curly was beginning to protest that that wasn't a house at all, but either a church or a ruin or something of that kind, and that *his* grandmother lived on a farm, and he wasn't going to be deluded by anybody, the white-headed old lady on the terrace called out in very clear, ringing tones,

“And whom, in the name of wonder, Phyllis, have you got there?”

“A pair of originals, Granny,” was the answer, greatly perplexing and rather offending Curly, who thought they were being compared to some of the strange animals beginning with O that Tor talked about—an opossum, perhaps, or an ornithorhynchus.

But the thought of Tor brought with it other instructions; and disengaging his hand from that of Phyllis, Curly stepped forward, and went straight up to the old lady.

“You may bite my head off, if you like,” he said valiantly, protruding that member forward; “I’m not a bit afraid of you.”

“And who are you, my valiant little man?”

“You’re my grandmother, and you’ve got a farm, and we’ve come to see you because we’re so tired of the girls. We’ll help you to drive the cows and the pigs. We’re going to be farmers, Bunny and I, like Tor. Tor will teach us when his head doesn’t always ache.”

Bunny then put in his word, holding out his small brown hand as he did so.

“We thought it was time we made your acquaintance—Tor said so. Tor is very kind to us, though nobody else is. He told us how to come; and he took us to the station himself, though it did make his head ache to go in a cab, because it was a secret; and if the girls had found out, they might have stopped us. That would have been like the dog in the manger, for they can’t bear coming here themselves—I’ve often heard them say so; but *we* thought it would be nice, and Tor said he was very happy here when he was a little boy. So I hope you will keep us and let us stay with you. Oh, and I hope you are very well.”

The old lady did not attempt to interrupt this long speech, but sat erect in her chair, looking at the two children with great steadiness. She was a very

handsome old lady, though her face was not soft and tender, as some people's are when they have reached her years. Yet it was a face that many people liked to look at, and Bunny found his eyes riveted upon it as he proceeded with his discourse. Curly was also looking at her. Some people found those clear, keen eyes hard to meet, but not so the children.

"I like you," he said suddenly, as soon as Bunny had finished what he was saying—"I like you, and I want to stay with you a whole long time."

"Ring the bell, Phyllis," was all the direct answer made to these advances. Phyllis stepped within the room, and meantime nobody spoke, and the little interlopers stood looking curiously about them.

It *was* a funny house—there could be no two opinions as to that. This south front which they could see, running along the wide terrace-walk, was all built of grey stone, over which creepers of every kind seemed to be growing. There was only one story over the ground-floor rooms, and all the windows, both above and below, were divided into little narrow partitions by heavy stone mullions, and the glass was all in queer little leaded panes, just as the children had sometimes seen it in very old churches. Some of the windows projected out in little bays or oriels, as they found they were called, and the whole house looked as if it had been

jumbled up together all anyhow—as Curly afterwards told his grandmother, when they were on more intimate terms. But though they were very much puzzled and surprised at the way the house was built, they began to feel very much delighted too, for it could not be denied that there was something very romantic about such a place, and if they could not live in historical times themselves, at least it was something to live in a house that had been a house when history had been going on.

Bunny explained all this afterwards to Curly, who was still rather disposed to be sorry that the place was not a real farm-house. But at least there was consolation in the thought that the farm was not very far off, and meantime they must make the best of things as they were.

The pause on the terrace was interrupted by the arrival upon the scene of a sober and highly respectable butler.

“Watkins,” said the old lady, “tell Mrs. Blake to have the nurseries got ready immediately. Two young gentlemen will want them to-night.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“And send to the station for their luggage—I suppose you brought a box with you?”

“No, only our night-things in parcels,” answered Bunny, displaying his. “Tor said we could have our things sent after us, if you decided to keep us. We

should have been found out if we had packed a box and taken it away with us. When boys run away they never have luggage, you know."

If the man-servant was surprised by this answer, at least he gave no sign. He stood awaiting farther orders like a block of stone.

"Phyllis," said the old lady, as unmoved as her servant, "just send a telegram to Miss Chesterton asking that the children's things be sent here immediately. Let the telegram be sent off at once, Watkins."

"Yes, my lady."

"And send Hannah here at once."

"Yes, my lady."

In a few minutes appeared a smiling, buxom, elderly woman, in an old-fashioned cap and with a white muslin neckerchief pinned crosswise over the front of her dress. She looked at the children with an air of benignant curiosity.

"These two young gentlemen have come on a visit," said the mistress, briefly; "they will be your special charges. Take them to your room to have tea this afternoon, till the nurseries are got ready. They can come in to dessert if you will make them tidy."

And Bunny and Curly, who felt by this time exactly as if they were living in a book, were marched off by the elderly woman to pastures new, and adventures of which they had never dreamed.

### CHAPTER III

"WELL, I should like to know a little more about this sudden incursion," remarked Lady Chesterton, as she helped each of her small grandsons to forced strawberries and rich cream, which luxuries made Curly open his eyes wide in astonishment, for it had not occurred to him to associate strawberries with any months earlier than June and July. "What was it set you off here, my little men? You have never paid me a visit before."

"No," answered Curly, "we never thought of such a thing. You see the girls all said it was horrid at your house, and they never went unless they were sent, and so we never thought it could be nice—though to be sure we might have guessed that the girls would be sure to say stupid things about everything. It was Tor who told us how nice it was. Poor Tor! I wish he could be here too."

"Why did he send you?"

"Well, you see we were so dull, and we wanted to do something different from everything we'd ever done before—"

“We’ve got no governess now, because Miss Merton is ill, and won’t be able to come back to us before the summer holidays. So we had lots of time on our hands—”

“And nothing to do that we hadn’t done hundreds and thousands of times before, and we were so sick of everything—”

“And we thought it would be so jolly to have a farm—”

“And that made us go to Tor, because he’s had one of his own—”

“And he told us that you had one, and said he’d stayed with you when he was little and had jolly fun; and he told us how to get here—and I wish he’d have come too; for it’s horrid for him at home, and I know he’d have liked it so much.”

“Why is it horrid for him?” asked Phyllis with interest.

Bunny screwed up his face into an expression of profound wisdom.

“Well, I don’t quite know, only he’s in disgrace. First they were cross because he went away, and now they’re cross because he’s come back; and he can’t get away because his head always aches so badly if he does anything, and nobody seems to care a bit for him, except Curly and me—we’re very fond of him.”

“Why does his head always ache?”

“Oh, because he’s had a sun stroke, and he ought to keep very quiet—I heard the servants saying so.”

“And he never can be quiet a bit, unless he’s shut up in his own room—and then there’s the noise in the street,” added Curly, “for the girls always *will* have a whole humguffery of people fooling round after them—”

“A what, dear?” asked Phyllis, her eyes brimming over with laughter, as she listened to the narrative.

Curly blushed, as he often did when asked to explain himself, but answered valiantly.

“A whole humguffery—Tor said so himself; and when I asked him what a ‘humguffery’ was, he said it was something like the crowd of fellows the girls always had fooling round after them.”

Phyllis gave a quick look at Lady Chesterton, and her eyes seemed to dance with merriment. As for the grandmother, she looked at Bunny and said,

“Why did not Tor come here with you, if he was so tired of the noise at home?”

“That’s just what I said,” cried Curly; whilst the elder brother considered the matter and answered,

“I think he was afraid to come. I think it’s because he’s in disgrace, and nobody cares for him, and everybody is cross. I suppose he thought you would be cross too.”

“You are cross rather often, aren’t you?” questioned Curly, with an air of genuine interest.

“I think perhaps it is time you little folk went to bed,” was all the answer he got. “Do you know the way up to the nursery? Very well; you had better go up, and ring for Hannah. She will be your nurse so long as you stay here.”

“She’s a lot nicer than our nurse,” said Curly, getting off his chair and going round to say good-night. “Everybody’s nicer here. Perhaps it’s something in the air. P’raps we shall get nicer too. Good-night, Phyl; you’re quite nice, for a girl. You might write and tell Tor that we’ve got here and we like it very much. I can’t write letters yet. It takes such a time to make the letters.”

The little boys went away hand in hand, and Phyllis looked at her hostess with eyes full of laughter.

“Aren’t they perfectly delicious? I do love that beautiful little viking, with his golden curls and his delightful speeches. But who is the Tor they keep talking of? And what has he done to make his own people treat him so badly?”

“Torwood is the second son—he is my godson, and was called after my maiden name. I had him here once as a boy, and thought well of him; but, as you know, I have not seen much of my son’s family. They were all brought up very badly—at

least with great laxity; and this lad was said to be wild and unmanageable, though I do not know anything worse of him than that he had a craze for emigration, and with a friend went to Australia to make his fortune, which of course he did not do. I heard something about his having been sent home ill, and I suppose he has failed, and made them all angry; but that is no good reason for treating him badly."

"No, indeed; and he seems to be kind to these little boys, whom the girls cannot care much about."

"So it seems. Well, we know something of them and their ways. They do not mean any harm, but I should not care to be entrusted to their care if I were ill. A house without a mother at its head is not a good place for an invalid. I have a great mind to write and send for him to come here."

"Oh do, Granny! It would be quite amusing; and the children would be so delighted!"

"My dear, I never make up my mind in a hurry—"

"Oh, Granny, Granny, how can you tell such a story?" interpolated Phyllis; whereat the old lady smiled, but went on in the same calm way, as if nobody had spoken.

"And one cannot possibly tell that this may not

all be part of a plan cooked up between him and the children."

"Oh, Granny, you unbelieving old thing! As if that little darling viking would not let it all out in a moment if it were so! You know you don't believe it yourself. You know it's only because you are too proud to break through your rule and tender an invitation. I think you might make an exception in favour of a sick godson; but you are so dreadfully obstinate."

"Really, Phyllis, you are not afraid of plain speaking. You seem to think yourself privileged to say just what comes into your head."

"Well, am I not, Granny? Who has always given me that license?"

"You are an impertinent chit, that is what you are; but you will not get me to do anything that I do not feel ready to do, so you may just as well make up your mind to that at once."

"Well, Granny, as no one has ever yet, to the knowledge of mortal man, induced you to do what you have not got a mind to, I suppose it is hopeless for me to try and begin; but I do feel very sorry for that poor Tor pining for quiet and fresh air; and if you are not a great deal more hard-hearted than I take you to be, you will soon have him down here to see what Ladywell air can do for him. You know you dearly love a bit of nursing."

The old lady made no immediate response, but deliberately helped herself to a glass of wine.

“A sick man, my dear, is a simple abomination. A woman when she is ill has the grace to know how to behave herself, and to show a little gratitude to those about her; but a man considers the whole universe in league against him, and those who do most to amuse and make him better are the very ones who get the roughest side of his tongue. I know their ways.”

Phyllis laughed merrily.

“I dare say you do, Granny; you know most things, I think. But at least you will keep these two dear little originals for a long visit. I think it was delightful of them to come in this casual way. You like it too, don't you, Granny?”

“It is never my habit to close my doors against those of my own name,” answered Lady Chesterton, rather magnificently. “I have no objection to a pair of boys in the house, provided only they keep to their own quarters and do not give too much trouble. I think you may chance to get on better with them, Phyllis, than with their numerous half-sisters.”

“*The girls!*” cried Phyllis with another laugh. “I love the expression they manage to throw into those words. Yes, I almost fancy I shall have more in common with the little fellows, if only they can

get over the horrid fact that I too am a girl. You should have seen the air the little viking put on when he heard I lived here, and the excuses for my existence his brother felt bound to make."

Meantime the children upstairs were rapidly reaching the conclusion that coming to this place had been the grandest step they could possibly have taken. They found Hannah up in the nursery when they reached it—fat Hannah, who did not look as though she could ever be cross even if she tried—with the hot water all ready for the baths, and a smile of welcome on her broad homely face.

"You're a whole lot nicer than our own Nan," said Curly, as he splashed the water over himself and her with the greatest good-will in the world. "She's always cross on tub-nights, and won't let us have hot water every day when we go to bed. Will you let us have tubs every night? Oh, thank you. Bunny, do you hear? Isn't she a real nice Nan? Is everybody nice who lives here? I say, Bunny, perhaps we shall get nice too. Suppose we got so nice that Granny kept us always: wouldn't that be fine?"

Then Bunny elicited the fact that Hannah had known Tor when he had stayed at his grandmother's as a little boy. She had been his nurse too, and had found him "a pretty handful, but a fine high-spirited young gentleman for all that."

She was quite concerned to hear of his present melancholy condition, which Curly painted in lugubrious colours, and quite agreed that it was a thousand pities he should not get out of that noisy house and into the country, where sick folks had a much better chance of getting well again.

Bunny hoped she would represent all this to her mistress, though he did not say so, as Curly would certainly have done if the idea had occurred to him; but both the little boys were very eager to have Tor down in the country with them, partly on their own account, because they thought he would be a valuable ally, and partly because they were really very fond of him, and were sorry that he should be so dull as he was at home, cooped up almost all day in his own room, where nevertheless he could not find the quiet he so much needed.

The little brothers were so long getting to sleep, after all the excitements of the day, that they were quite late waking in the morning, and the first thing that struck them, after the delight of finding themselves really in the country, was the fact that nobody scolded them for sleeping so late, although the nursery breakfast had been laid for more than an hour.

“Bless their little hearts! they should have their sleep out—that they should,” was all Hannah’s reply to Bunny’s apologies.

And it was such a delightful breakfast too, with fresh eggs, and dear little rolls all crisp and hot, as well as the regulation bread and milk; and Curly remarked that if everything was always so delicious, and if they always had so much to eat, he was afraid he should really burst before long. Bunny was rather scandalised at such frankness, but Hannah only laughed and blessed his little heart again, and told them to eat all they could, for country folks who lived always out in the air needed a great deal of good food to keep them hearty.

“And when you’ve done, you must wash your hands and go to chapel for prayers, and then perhaps Madam will take you round the farm with her. She and Miss Phyllis always go first thing after service, every day of their lives.”

A daily service was quite a novel idea to the two little brothers; and though they liked anything new at the outset, they were not certain if such a thing might not get tiresome after a while. There had never been any prayers at home, as the girls did not care for the trouble of “that kind of thing;” and certainly nothing like the quiet little service in the beautiful old chapel of the ancient Priory had ever been witnessed by these two little boys.

The clergyman, who lived close by, or, in his absence, one of his curates, came every day at nine o’clock to take the brief service; and besides the

household of Lady Chesterton, a great number of her farm-servants, and several labourers or farmers from the immediate vicinity dropped in, and altogether there was quite a little congregation present.

The village church was not nearly so central as the Priory chapel; daily service had been a thing unknown when the present clergyman came to the place; and after much discussion with Lady Chesterton, who had always greatly regretted that there were so few opportunities for the people to meet together for prayer or praise, according to the teaching of the Church, it had been arranged that a short daily service should be held each morning in the chapel attached to her house. Her own presence and that of her servants would preclude the possibility of an empty church, and by example and precept, and the encouragement given them to leave their work for this brief period in order to be present in the chapel, the labourers found their way by ones and twos into the hallowed place, and, as many of them said to their wives at home afterwards, "It did seem to do they good—and it didn't waste much time, to be sure; and Madam never minded sparing them from their work, if it was to go to chapel now and again."

So by degrees the wives came too; not regularly, of course, but once in a way—this one one day, and that one another, as their home duties gave them

opportunity. And so, except in very bad weather, there was quite a little gathering beneath the vaulted roof of the little Gothic building. Phyllis played the organ, and the one hymn was always sung heartily and with enjoyment. The whole service was over in a quarter of an hour, and Curly thought he should be fonder of going to church on Sundays if things were done more after that fashion.

When the congregation had dispersed by different doors, the children ran eagerly up to their grandmother, who had just emerged from the door by which they had stationed themselves.

“Good-morning, Granny!” cried Curly. “Is this your church, and why are you not clergyman too? Would you like to have me for your parson when I am grown up? I don’t think I should mind it so much, if I lived with you and had a church like that.”

The old lady looked at him gravely.

“I should like you to have a little more reverence for holy things,” she said, in a different voice from any that Curly had heard before, though it was not at all cross, and the face he looked up into was not severe either, only full of a meaning rather in advance of what the child was able to understand.

“I didn’t mean to be naughty,” he said quickly, “but the girls always laugh about everything.”

“Yes, perhaps so; but there are a few things that I do not care to hear made a joke of, even by little boys. But never mind that now; you can come with me, and I will show you how I manage my farm.”

Curly promptly put his small hand into that of his grandmother, and Bunny followed with Phyllis.

“Have you got a bull?” asked the younger boy, “and don’t you want a big whip when you go to the farm? I thought you’d be sure to have a whip. I thought I might carry it for you, perhaps.”

“Perhaps we can find you one presently,” answered the old lady, to his great contentment. “Now come with me, and see everything you like; but when I am talking to the people, don’t interrupt me.”

Curly nodded and seemed to understand; and as they passed into the big yard they had entered the previous evening, he looked about him with renewed curiosity, for it was a busy enough place to-day, full of people, and of noise too,—for a great threshing-machine was threshing out a stack, and there was such a puffing and a blowing going on as filled the air with steam and vibration; and to the children, who had never witnessed such a sight before, it was a thing not soon to be forgotten.

“What is it?” asked Curly, standing with his feet apart and staring at the great engine as if fascinated.

And then Lady Chesterton, who was a wise

woman and liked even little people to understand what they saw, explained to the children all that was going on—how the corn that was in one stack was put into the mouth of the great engine and the grain threshed out, and how the straw came out at another place and was built into another big stack, ready for use in the stables and cow-sheds when wanted. Bunny showed such an aptitude in understanding the working of the wheels that his grandmother patted his head and told him he would be a regular little engineer one of these days; and it was with difficulty that the children tore themselves away, divided by their desire to accompany their grandmother on her round of inspection, and to watch the evolutions of the snorting monster who was doing such wonderful things.

The permission to come back alone later on, if they would promise not to get in the way, together with the assurance that the engine would be at work till evening, decided the little pair to move on with the ladies; and it was an edifying spectacle to see how Curly listened to the questions and orders to the men, as “Madam”—as she seemed generally called—moved from one place to the other, noting everything, sometimes with approval, sometimes with censure, but with a calm appreciation and knowledge that seemed to the children something little short of marvellous.

There was a sick cow to be visited, a new calf to be inspected, two more hens "set;" and when the thirteen eggs had been counted out from the egg-room, of which Phyllis kept the key, and the fluffy hens had settled comfortably down upon them in the dark boxes well shut in from chance of molestation, the grandmother turned to the little boys with a kind smile, and said,

"If you are still here when the chickens are hatched, you shall have one of the broods for your own—if you will undertake to look after them properly."

Curly's face beamed all over.

"Oh, Granny! you are a nice Granny. We'll be sure to be here; won't we, Bunny?"

"If Granny will keep us all that time," answered the elder brother, with a shrewd appealing glance in his eyes.

"How long will it take?" asked Curly, appealing to Phyllis, who had by this time risen considerably in his estimation.

"Three weeks. Is that too long for your patience, sir?"

"No. I shouldn't care if it were three months, or even three years, if we might stay here all the time," was the bold rejoinder.

There was a laugh at that, and Lady Chesterton said, smiling,

“Well, at least if your father does not recall you, you shall stay to see your chickens out.”

As the round of the farm was made every morning, there was not much to detain them, and soon the party emerged into a piece of outside kitchen-garden, bordered on one side by a paddock, in which a solitary beast was grazing, who looked suspiciously at the intruders.

“There’s the bull,” said Phyllis; “he is not quite such a nice pet as some of the things you have seen.”

But hardly were the words out of her mouth before Curly was over the iron fence and in full career towards the savage brute.

“Child, child, what are you doing? Come back this instant!” cried the grandmother, and that in such imperious tones that the child paused in his headlong flight and looked back, though without moving.

“All right, Granny; I only want to take him by the horns,” he called out cheerfully, his cheeks flushed, his eyes sparkling, his yellow curls waving in the wind, a perfect little picture of sturdy independence.

“Come back at once,” was the imperative call; and the child obeyed, though with manifest reluctance, the bull not moving, though he glared at the small intruder with an ugly gleam in his savage eyes.

“Why didn’t you let me go?” he asked in rather an aggrieved way. “Tor said that if we came to see you, we were to be sure to take the bull by the horns.”

Phyllis laughed merrily, and the face of the grandmother, which had contracted with anxiety, now relaxed into one of her peculiar smiles.

“Torwood seems to have told you a variety of remarkable things; but understand, children, you must never go into this paddock. That creature would be the death of you before any one could get in to help you. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” answered Bunny, readily; “I will take care of Curly.”

The next visit was to the gardens, where there was so much to see and to talk about that most children would have grown weary and gone off to their play. But not so the two little brothers, to whom everything was like a strange new game, played by their elders for their express benefit; and when Phyllis, remarking that she had some potting to do, left her grandmother deep in the discussion of the spring sowings with the head-gardener, the children ran eagerly after her, asking if they might not help.

“If you like,” answered Phyllis. “I should be very glad to be helped, only it is very dull work, you must know.”

But the boys were eager to assist, and they did not find it dull at all. First they found great pleasure in looking at the flowers in "Phyl's greenhouse," as they called it, and looked at her with more respect when they heard that she managed everything herself, and had done so ever since she was quite a little girl and had begged to have a greenhouse of her own to rear her favourite flowers. It was fascinating to learn the names of all the pretty things, and to fill the water-pots, as fast as Phyl emptied them, from the tank underneath the stage, in which Curly, to his infinite joy, caught a small frog. Then certain plants were put aside that wanted potting, and Bunny was deputed to fetch up a small wheelbarrow from a neighbouring corner, and in it the pots were placed and wheeled to a delightful little dark shed, full of empty pots and heaps of soil and tools of various descriptions. And then began the mysteries of changing the flowers from little pots into big ones, giving to each the kind of soil it liked best, breaking up crocks for the bottom of the pots, and watering them when the operation was over. Phyl talked so charmingly about her flowers, and made it all so interesting, that the children burned with desire to have a garden of their own and grow plants for themselves; and the morning slipped away so fast that they could hardly believe their ears when the sound of the one-o'clock gong

warned them to run indoors to be washed and made fit to sit down to luncheon with their grandmother and Phyllis.

The afternoon was spent almost as entrancingly in the stack-yard, and it seemed as if years divided them from the dull days at home, in which they had been tired of everything, when they walked back to the house in answer to a summons to tea.

And when good Hannah met them with the news that their clothes had come from London, and that no objection had been raised to the visit they had planned to make at their grandmother's house, Curly fairly hugged the kind old soul, and Bunny gravely told her that he would marry her when he grew old enough, and that they would all live together on some ideal farm of their own, with Tor to direct operations and keep everything going right.

And so in blissful plans and projects ended the first day at Ladywell Priory.

## CHAPTER IV

“GRANNY,” said Curly, “may we have a garden of our very own?”

“What would you do if you had one, do you think?”

“Grow flowers in it, of course,” answered Curly, “like what Phyl has in hers. I like Phyl’s garden better than yours. She has nice big bushy flowers that come up by themselves and do as they like, and don’t all go into patterns, like they do in the Park in London.”

“And you think herbaceous borders are made in a day, do you, young man? How long do you think Phyllis has been in collecting her plants and flowers?”

Curly had no ideas on this subject. He stared rather vaguely, and Bunny came to his aid by adding,

“We should grow vegetables too—nice fresh vegetables, like we have here; and we should send them to Tor, because he never has anything nice now.”

“He’s to have the flowers too,” said Curly, eager-

ly. "Mayn't we have a garden, Granny? We would take such care of it, if we might. We help Phyl a whole lot now—you ask her if we don't."

"You wanted a farm the other day," remarked the grandmother with one of the smiles the children were beginning to think less grim than they had done at first. "If you change your minds every day of your life, what am I to think of your fancies?"

The little brothers exchanged glances, and then Bunny said,

"You see, it's like this: we should like the farm best, but we're afraid we couldn't manage it without Tor to help us; but we might manage a garden, perhaps; and now he's so much worse again, he would like to have some nice flowers and things to cheer him up."

"How do you know he is worse?" asked Lady Chesterton, quickly.

"Madge said so—she wrote to us yesterday. The girls don't often write; but I suppose she was hard up for something to do. She said it was so tiresome of Tor to keep so bad, and that since it got hot he's not once been outside his room, or even had the blinds up, and that his being at home takes up one of the spare rooms just when they want to fill the house and have a lot of people. They've bundled him into a smaller room to be more out of the way—a horrid hot little hole under the roof, where I

wouldn't sleep for something in the summer—and taken up the room he had ; and the servants their fine friends bring have our nurseries : and a nice noise there will be all day and most of the night. Granny, don't you think we might have some flowers for him ? He has so little that's nice, and people are so unkind to him."

Lady Chesterton had risen and walked to her writing-table as the child was speaking. Curly was a little disappointed at the small amount of interest she seemed to take in what he was saying ; but at his question she turned and looked at him.

"Can you think of anything better than that ?"

Bunny was silent ; but Curly said promptly,

"I can."

Phyllis looked as if she could too, but she said nothing, though her eyes were full of fun ; and Lady Chesterton went on speaking as though she had not asked a question.

"This is a telegram to your father, boys, to tell him to send Torwood here if the doctor approves of his taking the journey. Now, if he comes, will you undertake to wait upon him, so that he may feel at home without wanting a servant to attend to him all day ?"

Both the little boys were fairly dancing with excitement and joy.

"Oh, Granny, of course we will ! Oh, Granny

what a nice Granny you are ! Oh, won't he like it when he is here ! Oh, we will have jolly good times, that we will !”

“You will have to give up a great many of the things you like best to do,” said their grandmother, looking from one to the other. “You cannot run about the farm all day if you are going to wait upon your brother, and you will not be able to have the same liberty as you have enjoyed all this time. You had better count the cost before you make up your minds.”

But the little brothers stuck manfully to their word.

“We'll stay with Tor. He was kind to us when we were dull, and we'll be kind to him now. It's worse for him than it was for us. Don't be afraid, Granny ; we'll take all the responsibility.”

Bunny was not quite sure what 'responsibility' meant, but he liked the sound of the word, and Curly was delighted.

“Yes, Granny ; indeed we'll have all the 'sponsibility. We are quite big enough to take care of poor Tor.”

“Very good ; I shall expect you to abide by your decision. I am too busy to look after an invalid myself, and there will only be you two to do it. So if you think you will get tired and wish him gone, we had better not have him at all.”

But the children were not to be daunted, and the telegram was dispatched; and before very many hours had passed, another message had reached the house saying that Tor might be expected the following afternoon, by the same train that the children had travelled by.

There was great jubilation when this message arrived, and the children raced about after Hannah, who was told to prepare a room for him; and they held great consultations as to what aspect would suit him best, finally settling on a north room, always rather dark on account of the big cedar-tree that shaded it—a room where the sun never shone save for an hour in the late afternoon, and which looked out into a cool shrubbery that could be reached by a little staircase close by. There was a comfortable sofa in the room, as well as the ordinary furniture of a bedroom, and under Hannah's careful ministrations the place soon began to assume such a bright and homelike air that Curly fairly capered with delight, wondering what Tor would think of it all.

“Why can't the girls make our rooms at home like this? They can't do anything sensible, I believe.”

“Sick folks oughter to be looked after proper-like,” remarked old Hannah, who had ideas of her own upon most subjects, and had heard a good deal

from the little boys as to the way things were managed in their house, much of which met with little approval in her eyes. "If there had been any gumption in any of them young ladies, Master Tor needn't never have got bad again. I've no patience with folks being too fine or too idle or too fond of their own ways to look after a sick brother. But we'll have him on his legs again fast enough once we get him here. The pity is Madam did not have him down sooner."

"That's what we said ; but she wouldn't listen at first, and Tor wouldn't ask himself, though we did tell him he'd better. We could have arranged it all quite nicely long ago, if only they would have listened to us ; but grown-ups always think they know best ;" and Curly drew himself up in a sort of unconscious compassion for the deluded creature who had not had the sense to learn of him.

Hannah laughed and looked wise.

"Master Tor had always a spice too much of his grandmother's temper in him to get on just as well as might have been—not but what she thought a good bit of him when he was here long ago. Ah, he was a rare one for mischief, he was ; I can't hardly believe he is a grown man by this. Well, he will find old Hannah remembers the things he used to like when he was little. What a life he did lead me, to be sure—bless his little heart !"

To the old servant the big brother, who seemed a man to his small comrades, was nothing but a boy himself, and Curly was almost scandalised to find him spoken of in this patronising way. Tor was a bit of a hero in their eyes, and it seemed ridiculous to hear Hannah blessing his little heart as if he had been a baby.

However, she was only too willing to carry out any plan for his comfort that they liked to suggest, and it was a source of great satisfaction that his room was so near their nurseries. They would be able to pay him surreptitious visits almost at will, and if he had been at the other side of the house this would have been more difficult, as they were not supposed to be out of their own quarters unless specially invited.

Next morning they were in a ferment of excitement, and Phyllis did not get as much steady help out of them as she had done on other occasions. She also got a little tired of the name of the big brother who was to arrive that day, though she tried to be as much interested in him as her exacting little companions seemed to expect. She was very sorry for him ; but, to tell the truth, she did not expect to find him much to her taste. She had an idea that he would be something like the backwoodsmen she had read about in novels, very rough and uncouth in his ways, and not much of a companion to any but

men of his own type. She thought it was nice of him to be kind to the children, and had encouraged her grandmother to ask him down, as it seemed likely to be a kindness; but beyond this point her interest had not extended, nor did she suppose that she should find much in him when he arrived.

The little boys had no difficulty in gaining leave to go and meet their brother. Lady Chesterton was sending the great landau and the big bay horses for him, and there was plenty of room for them. They had not driven out in such style since their arrival more than a fortnight ago, and mightily pleased they were with themselves as they sat back on the cushions, returning with gracious good-will the salutations of the countryfolk, who were getting to know the faces of the little gentlemen who were stopping up at the big house with Madam.

“I think I know just how the queen must feel when she drives in the Park,” remarked Curly, complacently, as he replaced his cap for about the tenth time on his bright head—for he was a courteous little gentleman, and pulled it off as politely to a beggar or a labourer as to the grand lady in her carriage who had favoured him with a nod. “I don’t wonder she has a bowing-machine in the back of the carriage, as the girls say she has. It’s a good thing she doesn’t have to take her bonnet off too—that’s one advantage of being a woman.”

“I wonder how Tor will like it,” was Bunny’s comment. “I rather think perhaps he’ll call it all humbug.”

“Tor will do everything that is proper,” said Curly with his grandest air. “Isn’t it jolly that he’s coming after all! I wonder if Granny will like him.”

But sometimes when little folks have set their hopes very high they find themselves somewhat disappointed in the event; and so it was with the little brothers who had set out in such high spirits to meet their hero.

The train came panting and puffing up, and a few people got out, and amongst these they soon espied the tall stalwart figure of Tor, upon whom they rushed with a joyous shout of recognition. But instead of returning their greeting in his pleasant and friendly way, he only turned round sharply, and told them to be off and not bother him; and he looked so different from what they had expected, and seemed so little pleased to see them, that they retired discomfited to the carriage to wait for him there. Curly really felt quite offended at being snubbed like that before the railway-porters, just after they had been doing so much for him in getting Granny to ask him down; and Bunny’s suggestion that perhaps it was only because his head was aching did not seem any real explanation.

“His head ached in London, but he was nice to us there. If he is so cross at Granny’s, I expect she’ll just send him home again. I don’t know what she’ll say to us ; for we told her he was such a nice Tor, and now he isn’t nice a bit.”

“Hush! here he comes. Why, he doesn’t look a bit like he did when we went away. Curly, I do believe the girls have worried him till he is quite ill. Did you ever see anybody before with such black marks all round their eyes? And he’s got quite thin, too ; he must have been ill—and that’s what makes him cross. Oh, poor Tor! I don’t mind what he says, if he is ill.”

Tor came out slowly to the carriage, following the porter who had his portmanteau in charge. It was no wonder the children thought him changed, for his face was perfectly white, and his eyes were sunk in purple caverns. He had his hat pressed down upon his brows, and when he reached the carriage he asked if it could not be shut up.

So, instead of the triumphal entry the children had expected, they had to sit quite quiet on the back seat, with the heavy leather covering blocking out all the light, and Tor opposite, with his eyes fast shut, knitting his brows with pain every time they passed over a jolting piece in the road. Curly was quite afraid lest the stern grandmother should order the young man straight home as soon as he reached

her house ; but he hoped for the best, and manfully resolved to stand by him, and if need be to go with him, though it was sad to think of giving up all the delights of country life.

Just as the carriage paused, as it turned in at the Priory gates, Tor looked up to say,

“I don’t mean to be a bear, you little fellows—some day I’ll be able to thank you ; but if you only knew what a head I’d got—” and something very like a groan finished the sentence.

Curly was quite satisfied—that little faint smile was Tor all over, and in a great state of wrathful pity at the state in which the girls had sent their brother off all alone, he flung himself from the carriage before it had stopped, and scampered off to the drawing-room regardless of rules.

“He’s come, Granny—he’s come ; but he’s not a bit like himself. I hope you’ll excuse him and not be very cross if he isn’t as polite as you might expect. Those girls have given him such a head : but he’ll be better directly he gets here—you see if he isn’t.”

Lady Chesterton rose. It was not her way to go out to meet her guests, but in this case she made an exception.

“Come along, Phyl,” cried Curly, pulling at her hand ; “I’ll explain to him that you’re not a bit like a girl, and then he’ll like you too. I would have

told him on the way here, only he didn't want us to talk about anything."

Phyllis, who never could resist Curly, now her devoted little cavalier, rose to do his bidding, he holding her hand and chattering all the time, as if to make up for his unwonted silence during the drive.

"I hope Granny won't send him away. He is rather cross, you know. Hannah says men always are when they're ill—she said they were like bears with sore heads. I wonder how she knows. I wonder if she ever had one to take care of. Are there any bears here?"

But they had got into the hall by this time, and Phyllis was watching with a little curiosity the greeting between her grandmother and the very tall, broad-shouldered young man, who looked at first sight anything but an invalid.

"Well, Torwood, so you have found your way here at last. If you had had any sense you would have been here long ago. What possessed you to go to London with that head of yours in such a state? Young men have no sense."

"If you'd had a spark of common humanity you would have asked me down before," was the reply which sent a shiver through Bunny's small frame. "But women are all alike—they can't bear to have a man poaching on their preserves."

Curly looked up at Phyllis, to find that she was laughing, and she squeezed his hand in token that all was right.

“My preserves, indeed! Hoity-hoity! as if I would ever give in to a trumpery headache! If you were half a man, you’d be ashamed to go about with a face like that.”

“I wish to goodness I could change face and head and everything,” was the answer, as poor Tor sank down into the nearest chair, literally unable to stand, putting his head between his hands the better to shut out the light. “Don’t expect to get a rise out of me just yet, but I’ll be even with you at your own game one of these days, if you can put up with the nuisance of me in the meantime.”

And then all in a moment Lady Chesterton’s manner changed into something the children had never seen before. She went up to Tor, and laid her hand upon his head with such a gentle touch that he did not shrink away.

“As hot as fire. No wonder it is aching! What has the doctor been recommending? Ice?”

“I believe so; but there was hardly ever any to be had. I suppose it was forgotten.”

“We will mend that now. Come with me, Torwood. You shall not be troubled to go upstairs yet. Here is a cool dark room for you; your own

company and Hannah's nursing is all you need just now."

Tor rose, with a few muttered words of thanks, and for the first time saw that there was a young lady as well as his grandmother in the hall. He coloured up a little, for his colonial life had given him a reverence for ladies, and even the household he had left had not quite cured him of the feeling.

"My ward, Miss Musgrave," said Lady Chester-ton; but Curly broke in there with his opinion on the subject.

"We don't call her that—we call her Phyl, and I dare say she'll let you too, won't you, Phyl? She's not a bit like our girls. She's just as jolly as a boy."

So Phyl gave her hand to Tor and laughed, and Tor tried to smile in the midst of his bewilderment and pain; and then old Hannah appeared upon the scene, and took command of it at once.

"Gracious goodness, Master Tor! eh, but how you have grown, and what a fine-grown young man you have got to be! But by the looks of you you should be in your bed. A fine lot of nurses they must be at your home! We'll have a different face on you before long—won't we, my lady?"

"I hope so indeed, Hannah. Now take him away with you, and see that these young pickles keep their distance till he is fit to stand their noise,

which will not be for some time yet. Hannah will take care of you, Torwood, and I will come and see how you are getting on in a short time. For the time being it will be better that you be alone as much as possible."

Tor was glad enough to follow the old servant into the shady library, and the children followed their grandmother into the drawing-room, talking all the while. Lady Chesterton's face was so stern that they were afraid Tor had offended her in some way, but her first words to Phyl relieved them of the fear.

"It's perfectly monstrous the way he has been neglected—doctor's orders ignored—left to fend for himself—just because a parcel of stuck-up young misses are too fond of themselves and their own gay doings to take ordinary common care of a sick brother. I should like to give them all a piece of my mind—letting him travel alone, too, when he can hardly hold up his head. Well, here he is, and here he will remain as a fixture until he is a very different kind of man—and that will not be in a hurry, by the looks of him, I should say. Why, it is sometimes years before a man gets over a thing of that kind, even with care and good nursing; and this boy has been disgracefully neglected."

Curly nipped Bunny by the hand in congratulation, and they received a bright smile from Phyl.

They only longed to go and tell Tor the good news, but restrained themselves in consideration of what grandmother had said just before.

In half an hour's time old Hannah presented herself with a face full of satisfaction.

“Yes, my lady, he has gone off into a beautiful sleep: and that's more than he has done this ten days and more, by what I can get out of him for his chaff and nonsense—he was always a boy for teasing of his old nurse, that he was. The ice to his head soothed the pain wonderful-like; and would you believe it, in that fine house in London the poor boy never could get hold of a morsel of ice—though it was ordered particular for him by the doctor—without he went out and fetched it for himself, and that he couldn't do when he needed it most. All they ever had in the house was wanted for company, and he had to do as best he could, and was stuffed into a hot little hole where he never could get a bit of sleep all night long. When other folks had gone to bed, he would steal down into one of the lower rooms and lie there till morning, all dressed as he was: and that's the kind of life he's been leading; his fine sisters making believe that there was nothing the matter with him, and that he was sulky and disagreeable—a parcel of hussies—” and Hannah lowered her voice to a sort of snorting mutter, recollecting that she was speaking of her mistress's rela-

tions, though they had done so much to rouse her ire.

Hannah was a privileged person, and Lady Chesterton did not check her, though she made no direct response to this tirade.

“Well, Hannah, you will be able to show us what your skill can do. You and these little men will have the main charge of Mr. Torwood until he is well enough to join the family circle. You know I am no hand in a sick-room myself.”

Old Hannah looked as if she knew no such thing, but she only curtsied as she withdrew, and the children ran off after her.

“Now we’ll have our farm, and Hannah shall marry Tor and come and take care of us all,” cried Curly. “Do let us go and see poor Tor. We won’t make any noise to wake him.”

After one peep into the darkened room, the children ran off to their tea upstairs, but were too excited to remain quiet long, and by-and-by raced down into the garden, from which vantage-ground they could prospect about the house better and were not often scolded for intruding, even though they were not supposed to come to the front of the house without leave.

Tor was no longer in the library—that they found out by peering in at the open window; and presently they were sure they heard his voice proceeding from

the drawing-room, and so they crept along the terrace to make sure, and were presently peeping in unnoticed at the door-window that opened to the ground.

Tor was on the sofa, looking very pale, yet more like his old self than they had expected to see him so soon, and Phyl was pouring out the tea from the old silver service, in the dainty way that was characteristic of her. Her eyes were full of laughing light, for Tor was absolutely teasing and chaffing his grandmother, just as Hannah said he teased her, and the little boys held their breath to listen, half frightened, yet wholly fascinated.

“Failed—of course I failed. What could you expect of a fellow who had picked up his farming in the school I did?” Tor was saying when the children first began to listen. “I tried to fit your pet theories to everything, Granny, and a lordly mess I made of it. What fellow with any sense in his head would ever have been so deluded as to think a woman understood how to farm?”

“Anyway, I’ve not failed and you have. Don’t talk to me, you impertinent boy.”

“Ah! and how much capital have you behind you, to pay up your losses with in a quiet way, so that no one is any the wiser for it?” asked Tor; and then there was a regular battle of words, which the children could not understand, but which proved to

them very clearly that their brother and their grandmother fully understood one another, and that they were excellent friends. And being satisfied on this point, they crept away again without presenting themselves.

“Oh, isn't it jolly!” cried Curly, ecstatically. “Now we shall all live together ever so long; and perhaps grandmother will give Tor a farm of his own, and he'll let us live with him and help him to take care of it.”

## CHAPTER V

DING-DONG! ding-dong! ding-dong!

"There is the bell, Curly. Finish your breakfast quick, or we shall be late."

"I've done, but I want to go and see Tor first."

"You'd better not. You'll get talking and be late, and Granny does not like that."

"Oh, I won't be late; but I *should* like to see Tor first."

"So should I, but I think we ought to go now. I'm going; won't you come too?"

"Presently; I'll not be late," answered Curly, who had less conscientiousness than his elder brother, and was rather fond of asserting his independence at times. So Bunny, seeing it useless to protest farther, ran off to the little chapel alone, and Curly got down from his chair, and ran across the corridors to the door of Tor's bedroom, which was shut but not locked.

He thought his brother might be asleep, and looked cautiously in; but Tor had been awakened from the tardy sleep which had only come to him

in the early morning by the clang of the bell, and as soon as he saw Curly he cried out to him :

“ I say, what is that confounded noise about, and how long does it go on ? ”

“ You mustn't call it that,” answered Curly. “ Granny would be angry if she heard you. That is the chapel bell. It rings every morning for ten minutes, I think. Don't you like it ? ”

Tor's face expressed his distress better than any words could do. In choosing the situation of his room, nobody had recollected the matin bell. The chapel was near to the oldest and coolest part of the house, and the vibration and clangour might be unpleasant even to heads in a less irritable condition than poor Tor's.

“ Chapel bell ! ” he muttered, between his clenched teeth. “ Do you mean there is a private chapel on the place ? ”

“ Oh yes ; and Mr. Condover or Mr. Dalrymple comes every day to read the service there, and lots of the people come too. It's tiresome sometimes, but I like it, rather. Granny and Phyl always go. Didn't you know about it, Tor ? Didn't they do it when you were a little boy ? ”

“ Not they—the days for such tomfoolery hadn't come then.”

Curly stood half-aghast, half-delighted at such an indication of independent opinion. He always felt

a deep admiration for his big brother's expressions of criticism on what went on, but he hardly expected that Granny's doings would be treated with the same contempt as those of "the girls."

"Sha'n't you go—I mean when you are up in time?" he asked with great interest.

Tor was in no mood to weigh his words, or to consider how they would strike a child. The bell was bringing back the raging pain in his head that the few hours' sleep had taken away, and not unnaturally his nerves were too much on edge for him to care greatly what he said or did.

"I go to a parcel of parson's rubbish like that? Not I! I should have thought Granny would have had more sense than to institute such a thing on her property. But women are always ready to let themselves be priest-ridden. Can nothing be done to stop that horrible noise?"

"It will stop directly now of itself," answered Curly, settling himself on the side of Tor's bed. "I sha'n't go this morning. I don't care for tomfoolery myself."

It was rather a relief to find somebody who countenanced his own vague feeling that the morning service was something of a nuisance. True, Granny had made the little boys quite free to go or stay away as they pleased. She knew that they might very likely feel wearied by something that

was quite new to them, and she had a great feeling against making into a trouble what ought to be regarded as a privilege; but the prayers were not really long or wearisome, there was something fascinating to the children in the novelty of a daily service, and the pleasure that others took in it helped them to see it in favourable colours themselves. Moreover, Bunny, who was less restless and more naturally devout than his younger brother, really enjoyed it, especially the music; and Phyllis let him blow for her now, which added to his pleasure and sense of importance, so that he never wished to absent himself on any excuse, and it had not occurred to Curly to do so either; but now that the idea had been presented to him, he was not slow to avail himself of it. He would stay with Tor—nobody could blame him for that.

The bell ceased its call, and in the relief of the silence that succeeded Tor felt a momentary qualm at the hasty expressions he had allowed to fall from his lips.

“You mustn’t displease Granny just because of what I say,” he remarked. “Does she expect you always to go?”

“She said we could please ourselves—that it was not a thing to do unwillingly. We’ve always been. Bunny likes it. You know he always was rather soft—you’ve often said so yourself.”

Tor's head was aching too severely for him quite to see the drift of his small companion's thoughts—how he was mentally setting himself and his big brother on a different level from the rest of the household, in right of their not caring for the things which so engrossed the women. Curly had a large share of the feeling so common to the youthful masculine mind, that there is something almost contemptible in womankind generally, and that it is a fine thing to look down upon them and their pursuits and occupations. This feeling had been fostered by much that he had seen in his own home; and though it had been laid aside for a time in the admiration he could not but feel for his grandmother's house and her ways of conducting things, it was ready to spring up again on the first opportunity; and as soon as he was shut up with Tor he began to feel that women were a very superfluous adjunct to creation.

It could hardly be expected that a young man like Tor could follow the workings of the child's mind, or see what such a feeling might lead to. Curly was regarded as a little playfellow, whose original speeches were to be laughed at, and his odd assumption of importance rather encouraged than checked; and as he uttered this criticism of his brother, Tor could not but laugh—it sounded so very patronising in his mouth.

“Well, you are not soft for your years, at any rate. I say, Curly, is there such a thing as a cup of tea to be had in the establishment at such an hour?”

“I’m afraid not till service is over—at least not a fresh cup. But I’ll get you one from our breakfast—it will be better than nothing. And when Hannah comes back, she’ll make you some fresh.”

“Bother the service!” was Tor’s muttered complaint. “I might almost as well have stayed at home. I *could* get tea in the morning even there.”

“I’ll get you some—I’ll make it for you myself,” cried Curly, roused to great zeal by his brother’s state of irritable suffering, which he could see without fully understanding. It had been partly their doing that Tor had come here at all to be made well; it would never do for him to think that he would have been better off in his own house with those girls.

So Curly dashed off to the kitchen—just now deserted—and proceeded to make a fine mess there, turning out cupboards, ransacking drawers, and leaving traces of his presence all over the place, before he found the tea, which was all the time in a caddy under his very nose. He lugged the big kettle on to the fire, and got the best silver tea-pot out of the pantry, and broke one of the best Worcester tea-cups in rooting about there. He was in such a hurry that he could not stay to put anything back;



MAKING TEA.



and then the kettle would not boil, and he began poking at the fire, and managed to upset a saucepan that was standing on the oven ; and such a mess as the kitchen was in by the time the servants came back had seldom been seen there before.

“ I can't think why you all go out together, and leave things to do themselves,” said the child with an injured air, as the cook stood looking about her in bewilderment and dismay. “ I want some tea for my brother, and everybody had gone off to that old chapel. I call it quite silly.”

Luckily for Curly, he was a favourite in the lower regions, and had got a reputation for saying queer things, so that nobody scolded him ; though old Hannah shook her head, and said that that was not the way that little gentlemen ought to speak. However, cook soon managed to make the kettle boil, and he was allowed to carry up a cup of tea, Hannah saying that she would bring the invalid his breakfast, and that she had hoped he would have slept on till now, as she had found him asleep when she had looked in at eight o'clock that morning.

“ It was the old bell that woke him up,” answered Curly, “ and it has made his head as bad as ever.”

“ Dear, dear ! to think we should none of us have thought of that ! Well, I am sorry. But we must see what can be done another morning. I'll come and see to him in a moment, Master Curly.”

Curly went off with his cup, only to find that the long delay had tried Tor's nerves a good deal. He was not nearly so good-tempered, the child thought, as he had been in town, and he scolded Hannah when she came, and would not touch what she had brought to tempt his appetite, and persisted, after drinking one cup of tea, on getting up, though she strongly advised him to stay in bed and try to sleep again.

"And be woke up by another of your bells, just as one is beginning to get a little peace? No, thank you; I have had enough of that. It is worse than not sleeping at all to be awakened by such a horrible noise, after counting pretty well every hour as it passes, all night. No more of it for me, thank you."

However, Tor accepted his small brother's services as valet, for he had hardly strength to wait upon himself, and was in no mood to be beholden to his grandmother's servants. Curly was proud of being promoted to this position; though he suffered rather from what Hannah called "the rough side of his tongue," and did not understand as well as she did that a patient on the verge of a nervous fever is not the pleasantest or the most complaint of companions to deal with.

Curly's stories were listened to with scant attention, and his questions answered in a way that was, to say the least of it, not too intelligible.

“You know, Tor, Bunny and I mean to have a farm of our own one of these days. We watch everything the farm-men do, so that we may understand what to do when we have ours. I wish we could really help. But they only laugh when we tell them so. What could we really do to make ourselves useful? You must know—you had a farm of your own once, you know.”

“Turn the cattle into the hayfields, if you want to please them thoroughly,” answered Tor, in his lazy, languid way. And Curly made a mental note of this, and returned to the charge, wondering if his brother would ever be like himself again, and if he would really teach them how to turn into farmers.

“Phyl has what she calls a poultry-farm,” he said, standing by the toilet-table whilst his brother shaved, and wondering when he should be old enough to go through that mysterious process. “She has a lot of wire ‘runs,’ as she calls them, places wired in all by themselves, and they can be moved about in the field, so as to change the ground for them. She has different sorts of chickens in each wire place. She tells us their names, only I forget them so soon. Why do they all live apart, Tor, and what would happen if they all got mixed up together?”

“You’d better try and see,” answered Tor, who found it easier to tease Curly than to answer his

questions. "Don't you know what a fuss girls always make about nothing? I suppose this Phyllis, as you call her, has nothing else to do than fool round after her chickens?"

Curly shook his head doubtfully.

"Phyl does a good lot of things, but after all she's only a girl. I suppose she can't have much sense, really."

"Not likely, is it? Well, I suppose I must pay my respects to the ladies now, and then we'll find a cool, quiet corner for ourselves somewhere, and I'll try to sleep myself into a better temper."

"Oh, I thought you were rather cross; but you always know when you are, which is such a comfort. The girls are as cross as two sticks, but they always think it is somebody else."

Tor followed his brother downstairs, and finding nobody in the house, they went out into the garden, and presently encountered the ladies coming back from the inspection of the farm-premises.

Tor was looking seedy and shaken enough to bring upon his head a sharp reprimand for being so foolish as to be wandering about out of doors in the heat; and after an attempt to pass himself off as perfectly well, he admitted that shade and rest were pleasanter than anything else, and was established under the biggest of the big cedar-trees, to stay there till it was fit for him to move about again.

The children spent most of the day with him, and Lady Chesterton and Phyllis brought their books and needlework out there in the afternoon; and it amused the little brothers very much to hear Tor tease their grandmother and answer her sharp speeches with words quite as keen as her own. It seemed as if she enjoyed it too, for she laughed as much as anybody at some of the attacks made upon her. And she made Tor talk of himself, too, and his doings in Australia, and the causes which had brought about the downfall of his hopes of success; and they thought that she seemed to see that the fault had not been his, and was quite on his side when he said that but for the stroke he had had, which had made his friends ship him back to England, whether he would or no, he might have retrieved his former position and made up the losses he had sustained.

“But I had no choice in the matter, and here I am, a useless log—and whether I am ever good for anything again seems a very doubtful thing. And in these enlightened days nothing can be done without passing no end of examinations—and a nice fellow I should be over books, should I not?”

“You ought to get a land-agency—that would, not want examinations,” answered the grandmother “and that is what you are best fitted for.”

“Such berths are not picked up every day, and

there are no end of fellows after them—fellows from the Agricultural College, with certificates and all that at their backs. My only certificate is one of failure out there. Is it likely anyone would trust me with his affairs, when I have so muddled my own?"

Bunny and Curly listened to everything without entirely understanding. But they understood this much—that Tor, though he always made light of it in one way, was not at all happy, and didn't know what was to become of him; and they thought it quite strange that Granny did not at once give him one of her farms, and let him live there and manage it for her, and help her with her own. For she was certainly getting rather old to see after so much land. They had heard her say so to Phyllis, and whom could she find better to help her than Tor?

Perhaps it was because he was rather unhappy that poor Tor was so irritable sometimes. The little boys tried not to feel disappointed at the result of their good offices toward their big brother, and there were times when Tor's company was very agreeable and amusing; but there were also days on which it was anything but pleasant to be much with him; and though he generally tried to make up afterwards for his sharp speeches, and they knew it was all the fault of his aching head

that he spoke in that way to them, still it was disconcerting, and made them rather afraid sometimes to approach him.

On one of the days when he had sent them away, and they had hardly seen him since morning, Curly wandered into Phyl's room just as she had finished dressing for dinner, to communicate some of his woes to her, for he always thought that she understood Tor. He was never cross to her, and his face often lighted up when she came near, and he did not quarrel with her, as he often did with his grandmother. He let the children talk to him about Phyl as much as they pleased, and he seemed to like her quite as much as they did, though she was a girl.

"Why, what a dismal face, my little viking!" cried Phyllis, as she saw him come in. "What is the matter, Curly?"

"I think everything is the matter," was the comprehensive answer. "I don't enjoy anything a bit now—and it all used to be so nice."

Phyllis was sitting on the cushioned seat of the oriel window with a little red-edged book in her hand. There was yet a quarter of an hour before dinner—plenty of time to inquire into Curly's troubles.

"And what has come to spoil the pleasure?"

"That's what I don't know. I thought it would

be so nice when Tor came, but it hasn't been a bit what we expected. He can't teach us any of the things we want to know, and often he is cross if we speak a single word. And things that used to seem nice are all spoilt now, and I feel heavy and miserable all down;" and he passed his hand all over his small person. "And it used to be all so nice. Is it because Tor is cross that everything is different?"

"I do not see any reason why that should spoil your pleasure altogether. We are all sorry for poor Tor and his bad headaches, and we should like to see them cured faster; but when people have been ill and neglected so long, it takes a long time to get matters right again; and this very hot weather is against him. But he is better and stronger than when he came, though you do not see much change from day to day. You know he does not mean to be cross, but when his head is bad he can hardly help it."

"I know," answered Curly; "but it doesn't make it any nicer. We wanted to have such fun, and we never have fun at all."

"Oh, Curly, Curly! when you do as you please from morning till night, and have no lessons and everything that you want."

Curly looked up inquiringly into Phyl's bright face. He knew that this was all true, but why was he so discontented?

Phyllis saw the question in his eyes, and answered it by another.

“Why are you never at prayers now, Curly?”

“I go to stay with Tor then.”

“Does he want you?”

“I don’t know. But the bell always wakes him up and gives him a horrid headache. I go to see if he is better. But he is always as bad as ever before the bell stops, and that makes us both cross.”

Phyllis looked surprised.

“Why didn’t you or he tell Granny before?”

“He said I wasn’t to. He hates to make a fuss. He wouldn’t let Hannah speak, either.”

“It would have been more sensible to have done so. No wonder he does not get on, if that happens every day. I will see about it. But that does not quite account for your never coming to chapel, Curly.”

“Tor said it was all tomfoolery,” answered the child with a certain finality in his tone. “It does very well for women and girls, but men don’t care for that sort of thing.”

“What sort of thing, Curly?”

The child wriggled about a little.

“Oh, you know—such a lot of prayers and stuff.”

“Do you mean you do not say any prayers at all, Curly?”

“Oh yes, I say mine; but Tor doesn’t, though—at least I don’t believe he does; I never see him.”

“It is not likely that you would. But we have nothing to do with Tor. You say your own still?”

“Oh yes; Bunny reminds me if I forget.”

“And what do you pray for?”

“Oh, to be a good boy and all that sort of thing—what nurse taught us, and what we’ve put on ourselves. You’re in now, Phyl, and Granny too; but I’ve left out the girls, because there are such a lot of them and I don’t care for them.”

Phyllis did not make any direct comment on this omission, but kept to the point in hand.

“You would not like to miss your own prayers, Curly?”

“N—no; I think I should feel naughty if I did.”

“You feel that they help you to be good?”

“I think they must. I believe if we forget them we are worse.”

“And on the days you are good you are generally happiest, are you not?”

“I think so; at least we used to be. I don’t feel so happy as I did once.”

“No, Curly; and I think I can tell you partly why not.”

“Oh why, Phyl?”

“Because you do not begin your day in a nice way. Instead of coming with us to God’s house

to put yourself into His hands when we meet all together to dedicate the day to Him, you keep away just for your own amusement. And not content with staying away, you try to think it is fine and manly to look down on other people. If that is the way you begin your day, I do not wonder that you are not happy."

Curly looked up wonderingly.

"Tor said so."

"Does that make it true?"

"I—I thought a man would be sure to know best."

"Oh, Curly, Curly, what an answer! Do you not know what Man it was who bade us watch and pray—who has told us to pray without ceasing, and has promised that where two or three are gathered together in His name, there will He be in the midst of them?"

The child looked struck and awed.

"Is it wicked not to go to church every day?" he asked. "Nobody does at home."

"No, Curly. I did not mean you to think that—only to look upon such services as a great help, not to be spoken of with scorn when we remember in whose name we are met together. It may not be the privilege of many people to be able to go day by day into God's house, and they may be as near to Him in their daily tasks as we are; but for us, who

hear the daily call, to neglect or despise it shows that we must hold our Master's word but lightly. In this world, where we are surrounded by so many temptations and by so much that is evil, is it not a happy thing to be able to go to Him often in the holy house sanctified to His service, where He has promised to meet and to bless us? Do you understand a little what I mean, my dear little boy?"

"I think I do," answered the child, slowly. "I will not laugh any more. I think I will come to prayers again. Perhaps I shall feel happier inside if I do."

## CHAPTER VI

NEXT morning, to the great surprise of the children, no bell rang out at the usual time, and Hannah came to tell them that notice had been given that for a time there would be no summons ; the congregation must assemble without it. Curly was greatly impressed at this piece of intelligence, and went to chapel as usual with Bunny, not unmindful of the words he had heard the previous day, which he had turned over many times in his wise little head, and had imparted to Bunny, who wished he had heard them himself.

The congregation had not fallen off at all on account of the lack of the warning bell ; and as Curly sat in his nook and looked round the beautiful little building, through the stained windows of which the morning sun was pouring with so much glory, he felt more than he had ever done before that it was God's house he was in, and that He must like to see humble worshippers met together in His name, and that He would certainly be with them

in so sacred a spot, and would give them His especial blessing there.

So he joined in the service with more earnestness than usual, and followed it as he had seldom cared to do before. The time seemed thus to slip away very quickly; and as they came out he got hold of Phyl's hand, and whispered that he did not believe he should ever think it tiresome again, now that he understood better what it meant.

Her answer was a very bright smile, and altogether the child felt that his day had begun well.

As for Tor, the difference that this new arrangement made in him was something wonderful. Instead of waking with a headache only a few hours after he had got off to sleep, he slept quietly till noon, and woke up refreshed and without the least headache or distress. He came down to lunch, half ashamed of his lateness, but looking so much brighter and better that they all exclaimed at his improved appearance, and Lady Chesterton by close cross-examination drew from him the information that he had got into such a habit of bad sleeping that he seldom even dozed off until long after daylight, and that hitherto, owing to the morning bell, his nights had been of only a couple of hours' duration, or thereabouts, at least so far as sleep itself had been concerned. Now and again he had been able to get a nap by day; but this was the

exception rather than the rule, and for the most part he had been suffering from lack of sleep, which had done away with much of the good of the fresh air and kind care he received.

“You stupid fellow! and why did you not say something?”

“I did not wish to criticise your ladyship’s arrangements.”

“Just like a man—to go growling and grumping all his time, hardly fit to hold up his head, whilst the mischief could be remedied by half-a-dozen words. Really the stupidity of menfolk passes belief. It is a continual revelation to me.”

Curly’s eyes were opened wide in astonishment.

“At our house it’s just the other way—it’s the girls who are so stupid. I thought men had all the sense.”

“No doubt you did, my dear; it is a way your sex has; but do you think one of your sisters would have gone on enduring all the misery of broken nights and distracted mornings, rather than speak a single word to have things set to rights?”

“Not they. They would have made an awful fuss directly.”

“And shown their good sense by doing so. I’ve no patience with the folly of men—it passes belief.”

“If it had been for anything else, perhaps I would

have spoken," said Tor; "but the chapel-bell seemed a thing that could not be interfered with."

"Stuff and nonsense! I should hope any bell that was hurting sick folks could be stopped without harm to anybody. So far as I know it is only the Salvation Army who refuse to hold their peace in face of hurting sick people, under the plea that God cannot be served without a noise, and that His service must be carried on at all costs. I hope we know better than that: at least you might have known your old grandmother better."

"I thought the people might miss it. One can understand when one has lived out in the wilds, as I have done, that there is something sweet in such a daily call"—and Tor stopped short, colouring as he spoke, as if he had said more than he intended.

"Why, Tor, you said it was all tomfoolery!" cried Curly, eying his big brother as though he thought he was playing on the credulity of Granny.

The flush deepened in Tor's face, and nobody made any reply. The elders of the party were better able to understand than the children that careless words spoken in momentary irritation, and in great discomfort and pain, might not really express the true feelings of the speaker; yet they could not but regret that such unguarded words had been allowed to escape and fasten themselves upon the retentive memory of a young child.

“ You needn’t treasure up against me every word I say,” growled the young man at length; and Curly felt as if he had betrayed his hero, and was ashamed of himself, though he could not make out whether Tor had spoken in jest to him, or whether he had been trying to “ chaff ” Granny. Certainly Tor had not had the smallest idea of deceiving anyone, yet he asked himself afterwards whether he had spoken what might sound like hypocrisy in one who had never greatly valued the church privileges to which he had the right of admission, and who had seldom troubled his head over his many acts of careless omission.

In the atmosphere of that house he was finding, as the children had found, that there was something which had never before entered into his life, and it had a sweetness to which he was altogether a stranger. It roused new feelings within him, though at present these feelings were too vague to be defined.

That afternoon was a very happy one. Granny suggested that, after an early tea, Tor should take a drive and the little boys should go with him, and this idea was pleasant to everyone. The weather was not so hot or bright as it had been, and after four o’clock there was little fear that the sun would be too hot, if they kept by the shady lanes and out of the dust and glare of the turnpike road.

Tor, who had not so far been beyond the

grounds, was much pleased to make the attempt, and Phyllis was to drive him in the comfortable stanhope phaeton, which was high enough to give an excellent view over the hedges as they went along, and there was ample room on the back seat for both the little boys.

It was a very merry party that set forth. Tor was his real self that day, full of interesting talk, eager for information about all they passed, recalling funny reminiscences of past days, when he had been on a visit here in his childhood, and making them laugh unrestrainedly over some of the stories he told them of the pranks he had played and the scrapes he had fallen into.

The worst of such stories is that when grown men and women tell them in after-days, they sound so funny that children naturally long to do like things, so as to gain similar experiences for themselves.

Whilst Tor and Phyl were laughing so much over the naughty tricks he had played when he was a little fellow, Curly was wondering in his heart whether he and Bunny could not emulate their brother's feats, and distinguish themselves as he had done. Old Hannah had often told them what a boy Tor was for mischief, and she had never seemed to like him any the less for it. Why should they not have some fun too? They had really been very good all this time, in the hope that Granny would

find some farm-work for them to do, or would at least give a farm to Tor, in which case they could live with him (they thought) and help him; but these ideas were fading now as time passed by, and nothing was done. The impatient children thought that surely if Granny had the slightest intention of being a really nice Granny she would have declared herself before now; and the disappointment made Curly a little bit reckless, as did also the feeling of elation which had followed upon his unwonted depression.

"I wish we could do some of those funny things like what Tor did when he was little," he said to his brother as they sat at tea together at the conclusion of the drive. "Everybody else does funny things but us. Why can't we think of them too?"

"I don't know," answered Bunny, doubtfully; "but I think they might think us naughty if we did them."

"Well, I don't much care if they did. They all laugh at Tor now. Why shouldn't they laugh at us too?"

"But they didn't laugh then: he was whipped and sent to bed—he said so. You wouldn't like that, Curly."

"I don't think I should care if we had had our fun first," was the independent answer. "I don't think you've any spirit, Bunny. I'll ask Tor."

“I think he’ll tell you to keep out of mischief,” was the sage reply, and Curly sat ruminating.

“Fun needn’t be mischief,” he remarked.

“It mostly is—at least that’s what they call it at the time.”

Curly did not argue. He knew that Bunny was better at that kind of thing than he was himself, but he thought a great deal, and when he had got to bed that night, he lay thinking and thinking what he could do—though he hardly knew in his own mind what was in his head—only that he was fired by the ambition to win fame of some kind, and he did not see how it was to be done.

And then suddenly some words of Tor’s came flashing into his head.

“Turn the cattle into the hayfields”—surely he had said that once; and all in a moment Curly was aware of a great longing to go and do it. He knew quite well which of the meadows had been shut up for hay, and how long and sweet the grass was growing there, and how nobody was allowed to go in to tread it down. He had a dim perception that it would be a mischievous act to turn in the cattle from the pasture-meadow into the standing crop, but it would be so delightful to get up in the middle of the night, and go out into the dewy fields and play such an important part; and the idea got such possession of his head that he could not think

of anything else, and lay wide awake whilst Bunny lay sleeping soundly beside him, never a misgiving crossing his mind that it would be practical disobedience to steal out when he was supposed to be fast asleep, and full of longing for the house to be silent so that he could go on his way without fear of molestation.

Should he tell Bunny of his plan ?

On the whole he thought not. Bunny was not quite to be relied upon. He had grown very fond of Granny, and talked a great deal to her, and seemed a good deal older, and therefore less to be depended upon on an occasion of this kind. He had not been very responsive earlier in the evening. Perhaps it would be more fun to go alone.

Luckily for Curly, the Priory went early to bed, and soon after ten o'clock the house was quite quiet. There would be no difficulty about getting out undetected, for there was a little garden-door close under their rooms, the bolts of which he could undo himself easily ; and when he felt sure of making his escape unmolested, he slipped out of bed, carried his clothes into the next room, and dressing in a great hurry, ran down the stairs, and found himself very soon out in the dewy, fragrant night.

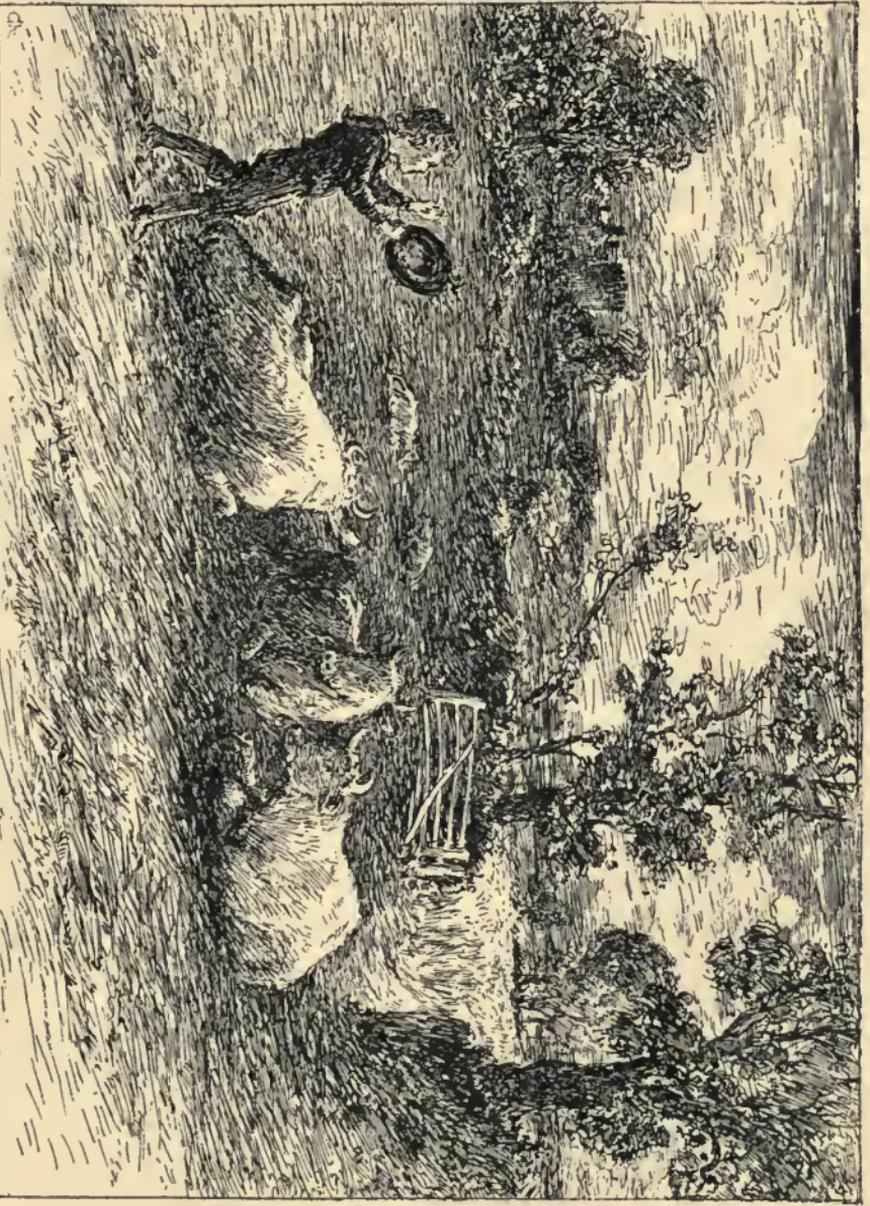
Curly looked round him in a sort of delight at the new beauty he saw about him. The moonlight lay softly on flower and tree. The nightingales

were singing, as they seldom sing by day; and there was a sort of mystery and fairy-like loveliness hanging over the sleeping place which gave it a new face, and made him feel almost as if he had got into an enchanted country.

But if the garden was beautiful, the fields attracted him still more—the big meadows where the sleepy cows were lying, who hardly cared to open their soft eyes to look at the little intruder. If the old creatures had not been so lazy, perhaps Curly would have contented himself with his moonlight ramble; but really the impulse to drive them was overpowering, and he thought how nice and comfortable it would be for them to lie in the soft long grass, instead of on that which they had cropped so short already.

It felt so grand, too, to be out all alone, and to have command over all those great placid, docile beasts. There was a gate from this meadow into the one beyond which had been shut up for hay, and with a little trouble and dexterity Curly managed the fastening—there was no lock on the gate—and had set it wide open.

“Now, then, gee up; get along; tumble up and go in,” he cried to the nearest cows, who showed very little eagerness to obey him. However, Curly was a determined little fellow, and having made up his mind that the cows were to go in there, and that



CURLY AND THE COWS.



they would be much more comfortable for the change, he was not going to be balked by their laziness ; and as soon as he had hounded a few in, the rest got up and followed, and he had the triumphant satisfaction of seeing them all wandering about in the nice long grass, which he thought must taste very nice, and be so very much more comfortable for sleeping on.

“We should think it was wet ; but cows don’t mind that, I suppose, and they can have one nice meal and good night before anyone comes to turn them out. Poor cows ! I do think it is a shame to give them only this short stuff to eat, when they give us such nice milk and butter. And they won’t eat so very much in one night, so that even if people are cross they can’t say much harm has been done.”

And Curly made his way home in leisurely fashion, greatly pleased with his nocturnal ramble and with what he had accomplished.

“I wonder everybody doesn’t come out at night, it’s so much nicer than by day ; but I’m glad, though, they weren’t all out to-night, or perhaps they would have seen me. I don’t think they are at all kind to the cows. I think they should have the nice soft, long grass to sleep on at night, whatever they have in the day.”

No one accosted Curly on his way back to the

house, and he let himself in and found his way back to bed with all speed and security. He went to sleep very quickly, not being troubled by any pricks of conscience, for so far he had not done anything which he felt to be wrong, though he fancied he might chance to get a scolding to-morrow for his night's work; and he slept so soundly that it was with difficulty he awoke next morning, and then it was to find Bunny quite shaking him to get him to open his eyes.

“Do wake up, Curly; I've got something to show you.”

Curly's first answer was only a sleepy grunt, as he turned himself over on his pillow again; but, as he found Bunny was resolved to wake him up, he sat up and rubbed his eyes sleepily, and asked in a rather injured way what was the matter, and why he was being routed up so early.

“It isn't so very early; Hannah will be here directly, and if she comes, she will kill them directly, and I want to take them right out into the fields, where they can't get in anybody's way, and let them go there. They are such pretty little things, I can't bear they should be killed.”

“What are they? I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Why, mice, to be sure—two mice in one trap.”

Curly was wide awake now in a moment. He

had been much excited by the importation of a new kind of trap in which several mice might be caught at once, and had watched its baiting night by night with great interest; but though mice were troublesome and plentiful in the nurseries, none had been caught until now, and he jumped out of bed to see the captives, and quite agreed with Bunny that it would be very cruel to kill such dear little bright-eyed things, though they must be taken away from the house to be released or Hannah would be vexed about it.

Very quickly the two little brothers hurried into their things, the memory of last night's escapade blotted out from Curly's mind by the excitement of an idea that was forming in his busy brain. He thought his clothes seemed damp and tumbled, but gave no heed to the matter. The great thing was to get dressed and secure their prize before Hannah came to call them, and this was easily accomplished, for it was still quite early.

"Let us put on a glove, in case they bite, and each carry one," suggested Bunny; "for if we have the trap, perhaps someone will meet us and tell us to give them to the cat."

The capture was effected with a little difficulty; but at last the terrified mice were mastered, and each little boy proudly held his prisoner in a firm though gentle clasp. They were kind-hearted little

fellows, and had no love for tormenting dumb animals, and, as their intentions were kind, they did not see why their captives should be alarmed.

“Bunny, do let us race them first,” cried Curly, as they crossed the garden. “It would be such fun to see who won.”

“But, Curly, how could we? If we put them down, they would just scamper off different ways, and it would be no race at all; but it would be fun if we could, though.”

The little brothers stood and looked at one another, and a bright idea flashed in on Bunny.

“Don’t you think we might have a swimming-match? I suppose mice can swim. We could easily get a pail of water and set them to swim across it.”

Curly was enchanted at the idea, and off flew the eager pair to the yard, where they knew they could find appliances for the match. But on the way they passed the dairy, and Curly suddenly stopped short.

“Oh, Bunny, let’s do it in here; there are always such nice big pans standing here, and nobody will interrupt us. See, it’s quite empty, and we can have as many matches as we like.”

Bunny willingly agreed, and they went in to look for a shallow pan to fill with water, but they were all in use.

“Never mind,” answered the undaunted Curly, “they can swim just as well in milk; and there are ever such a lot of milk-pans beautifully full. Come on.”

“But would they mind?” asked Bunny, hesitating; not that he saw anything personally objectionable in drinking milk that mice had swum in, only he knew that grown-up people had unaccountable prejudices on some points.

“Oh no,” answered the ever-ready Curly, “I know lots and lots of the milk is given to the pigs. I’ve heard them say so again and again. This pan can go to them when we’ve done with it. Now are you ready? Let’s have a proper start. Oh, don’t they jump and splash! Oh, what fun! Don’t let him go! Catch him again!”

The next moments were full of excitement to the children, and fine objects they were with the thick cream splashing on to them and adhering to their clothes in slimy flakes. Their shrieks of merriment and excited encouragement brought the dairy-woman hurrying to the spot, and there, to her horror and disgust, she found two wretched, half-drowned, half-choked mice splashing in and out of her best cream-pan, and spluttering milk and dust into half a dozen more.

No wonder the worthy woman lost her temper and gave a cuff to each of the small intruders. She

had been up betimes to churn the butter that would not come as it should, and there was an unusual demand for cream at the house that day, as company was expected, and here was one of her very thickest pans hopelessly spoilt by a couple of tiresome pickles who were old enough, she considered, to know better.

Bunny tried to apologise, and Curly to explain, but the irate woman cared for neither explanations nor apologies. Her cream was ruined and she was hindered in her work, and that was all she cared to think about.

With flushed cheeks and hanging heads the two culprits slunk away, and before they had got very far they were aware that there was another commotion in the yard, and the dairy-woman, who had followed them at a distance, joined the excited group and added her word in high-pitched tones.

“It’s plain it’s bin done a’ purpose, for the gate was shut and fastened agin, and they couldn’t ha’ done that theirselves, even if they could ha’ got in alone. It’s bin a piece of mischief or spite; and I hope Madam will have them as ha’ done it clapped into prison.”

“Oi’ve not a matter o’ doubt but she will,” said one of the cowmen, who was standing by; “Madam isn’t one o’ they poor-speerited folks as can’t stand up for hersel’ and gets put upon all round. She’ll

give it un, if her catches on un. Prison, did you say? O ay, I'll be bound it'll be that—and maybe hard labour too. Whoy, they tell me there was times gone by when they'd hang a man for so much as looking at a sheep—let alone turning all they beasts into a shut-up meadow that's fair spiled for the hay."

Curly waited to hear no more. His face was perfectly livid. There is almost no limit to the credence children place in words they hear from their elders, be those elders gentle or simple. It never occurred to the child that these simple countryfolk, in their irritation at the trick somebody had played upon them, should talk in a mysterious fashion about prisons and terrible penalties; it seemed to him to show his conduct in a new and terrible light; and from that moment he was perfectly convinced that what he had done, if he were detected, would serve to send him to prison for life, and might even prove a hanging matter, as it would have been, he thought, in the olden days in which he had once longed to live.

A moment before Curly had been on the point of imparting to his brother all that he had done the previous night. Now, however, his lips were sealed by fright, and he determined not to say a word to a single soul. Nobody had seen him—nobody could possibly know that he was concerned in the matter;

and unless he should find out that somebody else was going to prison in his stead, he resolved to say not a word to anybody. He hoped he might have courage to tell in that case, but nothing less dreadful than that should unlock his lips.

But what the little boy suffered those days that followed it would be hard to say. The scolding for the mischief they had done in the dairy, whilst it shamed Bunny very much, seemed as nothing to Curly, who was thinking all the while of his more heinous sin. He longed to take counsel with Tor, whose words had first set him on to think of such a thing, but he felt that he never, never could do that, because he had told a lie to Tor about it the very first day. When the news had first been brought, Tor had remembered his idle words, had told them to Lady Chesterton, who had asked him to question the little boy on the subject, and Curly in his fright had told the first deliberate lie of his small life about it: and had all the misery of feeling that he had done so, without the consolation of thinking himself believed; for, as a matter of fact, Tor had seen the little fellow creep out of the house that very night in the moonlight, and was perfectly sure he had committed the offence; and not knowing what had passed to terrify the child so greatly, had felt surprise and disappointment at his want of candour. Curly felt Tor's displeasure, and was doubly miserable. Indeed

just then everything seemed wretched and changed. He felt unworthy to be with the others, unworthy to go to church, or even to say his own prayers, and instead of replying to questions and caresses in the old fearless way, he shrank from everybody, and was cross to Bunny and snappish to Phyl.

Poor little boy! If he had only known how sorry some of the grown-up people were, and how gladly they would have forgiven him if he had but spoken the truth, he would have been saved much misery; but he felt bound hand and foot, partly by his own fault, partly through unreasoning fear; and days passed by, long dreary days, and still he was as far as ever from seeing any way out of the net he had woven for himself.

## CHAPTER VII

“FIRE! Fire! Fire!”

Bunny and Curly awoke with a start to the sound of that terrible cry. They had been aware even in their dreams that some great tumult had been going on, though it had not aroused them all at once to a sense of what was really passing. Now, however, the cry, which seemed to come from under their very windows, had awakened them to some purpose, and they saw from the window a dreadful red light in the sky which seemed to grow brighter and fiercer every moment.

“It’s a fire,” cried Bunny, huddling on his clothes as fast as his hands would let him, “and it’s quite near too. I can hear the crackling noise. Oh, Curly, I do believe it’s Granny’s yard that is on fire. Oh, suppose the house is all burnt up!”

Curly was shivering with excitement rather than with fear, and was dressing as fast as he could.

“Bunny,” he said quite seriously, “we shall have to take care of Granny and Phyl and Tor. We mustn’t let ourselves get frightened, because you

know there aren't any men except us to take care of the women. Tor is ill, and servants always lose their heads—I've heard lots of people say so. We shall have to take care of them. We must think of everything."

"So we will, Curly; so we will. Granny has been very kind to us. Now we will show her that we can be useful to her. Oh, here's Phyl. Phyl, what is it? Is the house going to be burnt up too?"

"No, dears; at least we hope not. But it is better we should all be up and dressed in case things go worse than we expect. The fire is in the yard, but it seems to have got great hold, and there is more wind than there was last evening. If it increases, there may be some danger to the house. But we must hope for the best. Are you afraid, little boys?"

"No, no," answered Curly, speaking more like his old self now than he had done for days. "We are going to take care of you and Granny. Bunny, let us go and see what they are doing in the yard. They may want help there."

Phyl smiled at the good-faith of the little brothers, but she was anxious herself to go to the scene of operations.

"Tor is there," she said. "He is directing everything. He has seen fires before, and understands just what to do." And it was something of a relief

to hear that the whole responsibility was not to fall on their small shoulders, for, however ready and willing they were to do everything, they had not much notion how to set about putting out a big fire.

Putting on caps and even overcoats, for Phyl said it might be cold work standing about in the yard, they hurried downstairs with all speed, to find the house in great confusion, servants hurrying this way and that, getting some of the most valuable articles of plate and furniture ready for removal if the need should arise, hurrying this way and that, talking, crying out, asking questions, exclaiming in terror when a brighter glare of light seemed to show that the flames were approaching, and making terrified inquiries after the mistress, Miss Musgrave, and the little gentlemen, as though they feared they were already in danger.

It was all immensely exciting. Outside there was such a great light all round that every tree and bush and flower seemed to be illuminated. Great showers of sparks were shooting upwards into the sky and falling again—almost like fireworks, the little boys thought; and above every other sound came the roar of the flames, and sometimes they could hear shouts in a voice which they knew to be Tor's, though they had never heard him speak in that tone of authority before. Phyl was as excited

as they were, and ran with them to the yard. In the very midst of it a great stack stood all in a blaze, and the two on either side of it had caught, and were flaring up with an ever-increasing fury. To the surprise of the little boys, no one seemed to be doing anything towards putting out the flames. The whole energy of the men was directed towards pouring water on some thatched buildings, and upon a row of sheds that stood very near the blazing pile, whilst others were pulling down the stacks not already in a blaze, and hastily carrying away the straw.

And standing not far from the scene of operations was the grandmother herself, watching everything, and sometimes speaking to the men nearest her, but for the rest leaving the direction of everything to Tor, who seemed the ruling spirit of the scene.

He was standing on one of the ladders reared against the thatched building, and sometimes was quite invisible from the clouds of smoke that enveloped him—smoke that was sometimes so red with the fiery breath of the flames that Bunny and Curly cried out that he would be burnt up. But he did not budge from his post, standing there, and encouraging the men who made the chain to pass up the buckets of water as fast as they could to him, whilst he poured them upon the smoking

thatch, and kept at bay the hungry flames, which seemed only waiting till he should relax his efforts, to spring upon the building and devour it.

“If those sheds once catch, it will be a very near thing for the house,” said Granny, speaking very calmly, though her words were rather terrible. “There is almost a direct line of communication from them up to the back offices. I do not know if it is right for Tor to exert himself so much; but the men would not work like that without his example and the stimulus of his presence.”

“The poor farm-horses—are they all safe?” asked Phyl; for these sheds were the stables of the cart-horses, and it was dreadful to think what might happen if they were still inside.

“Oh, yes; Tor saw to that first thing. The men were at their wits’ end to know how to get the terrified creatures to face the fire and come out, but he managed it by blindfolding them completely with a huge tarpaulin muffled round their heads so as to deaden the noise as well as hide the sight of the flames.”

“What a good thing for all of us that Tor is here!”

“It is indeed. This is not the first fire he has seen. He has all his wits about him, and knows exactly what to do. I confess that I am far less able to direct matters than he is. And the men,

though willing enough, have no idea of the best thing to do.

Curly listened with a sense almost of envy. Oh, if only he could wipe out some of the disgrace he felt weighing upon him, by some deed that should show how much he would do if he could! It was not that he craved glory or praise for himself—he was feeling very humble indeed just now; but he did so want to show Granny and the rest that he could be something else than a little coward. He felt that if he could only show his good-will by some service, he would try and take courage and tell the whole truth, and submit to the punishment, however terrible it might be.

Bunny was running about in his excitement, and in another moment Tor had called out to him, and he was climbing the ladder like a young monkey to hear what he said, and run backwards and forwards with messages. He was quicker and lighter than Curly, and seemed to be making himself very useful; and once drawn into the vortex of those busy workers, he came out no more, but they saw him flitting about hither and thither like a sprite, doing they knew not what, but apparently useful to more than one of the workers, and looking very proud and delighted with his service.

But Curly had not moved from Phyl's side. Since his moral fall he had felt much less disposed

to put himself forward, and even now it occurred to him that perhaps he was not worthy to be allowed to help, and for a moment the light and the glare upon which his eyes were gazing all swam together in a sort of red mist; but then he felt ashamed of his weakness, and, clasping his small hands closely together, he uttered a little, short, incoherent prayer—the first spontaneous prayer that had ever crossed his lips in that sort of fashion.

“Please, Lord Jesus, forgive me, and give me something to do, and help me to do it. I want to be good again—and I think it would help me so to help other people.”

So said Curly in his heart, as he stood watching the dancing flames; and it was only a few minutes later before an idea came flashing into his mind with such brilliance that he nearly exclaimed aloud.

But nobody heard him—nobody was thinking of him—and the next moment he had slipped noiselessly away, and was scudding along in the shadow to the other side of the blazing pile.

It had suddenly occurred to Curly that in the meadow just beyond the stack-yard lived all Phyl's pretty dainty chickens, in which she took such pleasure and pride. They lived, as he had told Tor, in little yards of their own, safely wired in, and they had little houses to go into at night. But as the child now remembered, these movable homes

were very near to the sheds which Tor was trying to keep from catching fire, and as the wind was setting that way, clouds of smoke and showers of sparks were being driven all over that field, and it might be that the poor fowls were in danger of their very lives.

He would have called Bunny if he could have got hold of him ; but as he was otherwise engaged, there was nothing for it but to go alone ; and racing along under the impulse of this new thought, Curly soon found himself in the meadow, with only the roar of the fire and the palpitating glow of the light behind the shed for his companions.

But he had not been mistaken in his idea about the poor birds. Awakened from their sleep by the noise and the light, they had come fluttering out of their roosts and were wildly beating themselves against the wire netting, terrified by the glare and almost smothered by the hot smoke and thick showers of sparks that kept falling upon them, actually killing more than one before the gust passed.

Nobody had thought of the chickens, not even Phyllis herself ; and for a moment Curly was almost daunted, for it was no light matter to plunge into those blinding smoke-wreaths ; and though he was farther away from the fire than he had been in the yard, he felt the heat three or four times as much,

for before he was on the lee side of it, whilst now the wind was carrying it right down upon him.

But the poor fowls; and Phyl, who would be so grieved for them to die like that! And had he not wanted to show that he could do something brave if he had the chance? He had asked for some little bit of work all of his own; would it not be very silly and cowardly to be afraid of it now that it had come?

If Curly had been a little bit older and wiser, he would have gone and asked somebody to help him; but it never occurred to him to do this. Here he was, and there were the poor fowls, and he must get them carried away and put in some safe place as fast as he could. There was a big empty stable not far away, with a lot of loose boxes in it. He would not mix the chickens—had he not heard that they were always kept apart, and that Phyl was very particular about it? He would give each kind a separate box, and then nobody could accuse him of doing any mischief.

But it was terribly hard work, and oh, *so* hot! Curly took off his overcoat to wrap the frightened fowls in, three or four at a time, but even then the perspiration poured off him, and he had to stop again and again to gasp for air, whilst the hot breath of the fire seemed actually scorching his hands and his face. The sparks kept falling on

him, and he often heard his hair frizzling as if it would catch fire; but in spite of all this, and the fatigue of his repeated journeys backwards and forwards, he still persevered with resolute determination, all the more resolutely because, as it was, so many of the poor chickens had dropped down suffocated, or dead with fright, and delay might mean the loss of more. Only five out of the ten white Sultans survived the terrors of that night, and Phyl was so fond and so proud of them that the child could almost have cried at the sight of the poor dead birds. The others were of hardier nature, and stood the terror and suffocation better; but there were a great many dead before his task was accomplished; and as for himself, poor little man, he felt almost ready to drop down with fatigue.

But the task was accomplished—the last journey had been taken. The rescued birds were beginning to settle themselves to sleep again in their new shelter. There was no danger of the fire reaching them there, unless indeed the whole place were burnt down; and as the fire-engine had now come, and the hose been set playing upon the burning mass, it did not seem as if this was very likely to happen.

Curly found all this out when he crept round to the yard again. He found that a change had come over the spirit of the scene. Tor was gone, and so

were the grandmother and Phyllis, and strange men were hurrying about, pulling to pieces the blazing stacks with long poles with hooks at the end, and playing upon the burning or smouldering masses with the hose that had now been got into working order. The buildings had escaped without anything beyond injury from the water; and though the scene was still animated enough to be interesting at another time, Curly was too wearied out to care to stay and watch it now. Moreover, his hands and his neck had begun to smart very much, and he wanted to get as far as he could from the noise and the smell of the fire. He felt half choked and altogether giddy and queer, and he made his way back to the house, wondering if he should find that everybody had gone to bed.

But he was soon satisfied on that score. The hall-door stood open, and as soon as he entered he heard the clatter of cups and plates, and the sound of voices proceeding from the dining-room. Evidently there was some supper being eaten there, and the scent of coffee pervaded the house. Curly was so thirsty that he decided he would go in. He did not think they would mind on such a night as this. And he wanted to be sure that nobody had been hurt in the fire.

So pushing open the door, he presented himself at the little extemporised supper then going on, and

an exclamation of dismay and astonishment burst from every person present.

“ My dear child, where *have* you been ? ”

“ Curly, Curly ! your hair—what have you done with it ? ”

“ My little man, you *have* been in the wars. Come and tell Granny all about it. ”

Curly came slowly forward, and as he did so his glance fell upon his reflection in the mirror, and he stopped short in astonishment and dismay at the object he presented. His face was as black as a sweep's ; his yellow curls were half burnt away, half singed to a dark-brown colour, and all fuzzled up into a dirty-looking mass. His clothes were as disreputable as his face, and he had great red patches on his hands that began to hurt him very much, and he felt altogether so dazed and funny that he hardly knew what to say to the questions showered upon him ; and he had a feeling that if he began to talk he should begin to cry too, and disgrace his manhood for ever. So he said nothing, and only went slowly up to Granny, as she seemed to expect him to do.

Tor put down his cup and stared at him with as much curiosity as the rest. Tor looked as if he had been in the wars himself, with his pale face and dark-rimmed eyes, and several suspicious red patches on his own hands and neck ; but he had been to his

room and washed away the grime, and had changed his coat too; and the excitement of the night had now passed off, though his head might feel the effects later.

“What have you been doing, old chap? We all thought you had gone to bed again, as you were missing from the scene of action. I thought it odd if you had kept out of it all, but nobody has a notion what you have been at.”

Curly had by this time swallowed down a cupful of milk that Phyl had given him, and he felt a little bit more like himself in consequence.

“I’ve been putting Phyl’s chickens into the empty stable. They were all getting burnt up—at least they were dying of the smoke and sparks. Some of them are dead, but I’ve put most of them away all safe. There are sixteen dead altogether; all the rest are safe.”

“Bravo, Curly!” cried Tor, whilst Phyllis ran and put her arms about him, crying,

“Oh, you dear little brave Curly—to think I should have forgotten my poor chickens! And did you really go and do that all by yourself? You are a dear brave little man.”

“I couldn’t catch Bunny, or I’d have asked him to help; but I did it alone pretty easily. It wouldn’t have taken so long if they hadn’t been so frightened.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? I would have helped you. My poor dear chickens!”

“Oh, it wouldn’t have been proper for you to have been there; it wasn’t women’s work,” answered Curly, with the importance due to such an occasion.

“And was it as hot as all this?” asked the grandmother, touching the burnt curls and the scorched, smoke-grimed little paws, of which Curly began to feel ashamed in the dining-room.

“It was when the wind blew the sparks over us that it got so hot. Sometimes it was only choky and stuffy, and sometimes it made me have to run away, and then the chickens some of them died. But I went back as soon as I could, and got more out—and I haven’t mixed them up, Phyl; I knew that would be naughty. I’ve put them all separate, though perhaps they may mix themselves by flying over if somebody doesn’t see to them early in the morning.”

But Curly was so tired that Phyl would not let him talk any more. He drank up his milk, and swallowed a few morsels of bread and meat; but he was too tired to be hungry, and was very glad to be taken off to bed, though he hardly knew why Phyl took him up herself, and bathed his poor little hands in hot water, and helped him to sponge away all the grime and smoke from his small person before getting into bed again.

But the pretty curls were spoilt beyond hope of recovery ; the soft hair came off in great flakes as soon as it was touched by the comb.

“ You’ll have to cut it short like Bunny’s,” remarked Curly, not without a sense of inward satisfaction ; for, though he had seldom troubled to think of it before, it *was* rather girlish to have long hair, and much more manly to wear it cropped short like Tor’s. So, as there was no helping it, Phyl took her scissors and clipped off the charred curls, and Curly stroked his round head with great satisfaction, and hoped that what was left of it would curl up round his head as Tor’s did.

“ For I should like to be like Tor when I grow up,” he said. “ Tor was very brave to-night, was he not ? ”

“ And so was somebody else,” answered Phyl, as she bent to kiss the tired little fellow ; and Curly suddenly put his arms round her neck, and answered in a low whisper,

“ I can’t be brave really. I’m afraid I’m a great coward ; but I’m going to try and be really brave—I am indeed. Please will you ask *Him* to help me ? You know you told us once He would.”

“ I will indeed, my dear little man. I think if you ask that Help you will not be afraid any more, and afterwards you will be so much happier.”

Curly was not quite so sure of that, if he had to

go to prison ; but at least he would feel that he had tried to do right, and he had been very miserable as long as he had kept back his crime and had told a lie about it. He wondered what Bunny would do without him, and if he would miss him very much ; and when his brother came up to bed full of the events of the night, and proud alike of the exploits of Tor and of Curly, never thinking of feeling jealous that he had not equally distinguished himself, Curly felt that he had never known before how dear Bunny was to him ; and asking him to come into his bed, he put his arms about his neck, and whispered all the story to him, and told him of the dreadful thing that would happen when the truth was known, as he intended it to be known the very next day.

And Bunny, who had heard all that the farm-people had said, fully believed that the offence was punishable by law, and that Curly would be haled off to prison for it.

“Unless Granny declines to prosecute,” he remarked, not in the least understanding what that meant, but remembering that he had heard the words used by grown-up people.

“Granny can’t help it—it’s the police who take people to prison ; and you know if she were to resist, it might be misprision of treason, and I think people have their heads cut off for that.”

“Why, so it might. Oh, Curly, how dreadful! Don’t you think you might escape before the policemen came?”

“I—I don’t quite know, Bunny; but we might ask Granny. I must tell her first, because I’ve told a lie about it; and I can’t be happy till that’s off my mind. She might let me hide somewhere—perhaps there is a room somewhere where people did hide in the olden times. But then she might get into trouble herself, you know, and I think I ought to go to prison rather than that.”

“Curly,” said Bunny, with warm admiration, “I think you’re very brave—I do indeed. When I’m grown up I’ll write a book about you. And if you do go to prison, I’ll rescue you—I will indeed. I’ll either go barefoot to the Queen and ask for a pardon, or else I’ll come with a rope and a silk thread and a beetle, and help you to escape like the people in books. Don’t be miserable about it. You shan’t stay long in prison. I’m quite sure *we* could do an escape very well; we’ve played at it so often.”

This was the most comforting thought that had come to Curly all these long days, and he clung to Bunny as to a tower of strength.

“Oh, I never thought of that. Oh, Bunny dear, how good you are! how I do love you! Some people would have been angry and have left me to my

fate. I don't deserve you should be so good ; but I sha'n't mind half so much if you love me all the same, and try to get me out."

"Of course I should never rest a moment whilst you were in prison. Perhaps I shall disguise myself and come as a warder, and get charge of you—but I suppose I should have to grow up first, and that would take too long. But I might be errand-boy to one of the bakers or people who supplied the prison, and get in that way. I might be sent to measure you for your chains, you know, and then we could arrange things nicely. But don't be afraid ; there are lots of ways of escaping, and I'll read them all up before I come."

In spite of the absorbing interest of the subject, Curly was growing sleepy. He had worked too hard for sleep to be driven away, even though this might be the very last night of liberty.

"I think I like the beetle best," he answered drowsily. "Don't forget to put the wax on his nose to make him climb straight. I shall be looking out for him. Good-night, Bunny dear. I'm so much obliged to you for thinking about it all. I'm not nearly so unhappy about it now."

And in effect Curly was sleeping soundly in another minute, though Bunny lay broad awake for a full half-hour longer, pondering the story his brother had told him, and wondering what would be

the result of the confession to be made the next day.

Truth to tell, the little fellow felt a great respect and admiration for his younger brother. He did not feel certain that he should have had the courage to speak out, knowing the penalty of such an act ; but he could admire the spirit which prompted the confession, and he resolved, if he could do nothing to avert the fate of his comrade and darling, either to share his fate or rescue him from it as quickly as might be.

## CHAPTER VIII

THE morning following the fire was a busy one for the mistress of the house, as may well be guessed ; but not so busy as to prevent her attendance at the chapel first thing after breakfast. And, rather to her surprise, both the children were in their accustomed seats, though she had given instructions to the servants that they were not to be disturbed, as they had been up half the previous night, and must be feeling very tired after their exertions.

She was, however, too busy to notice that the boys did not follow her out of the chapel when the service was over, but continued to kneel on in their places, and it was Mr. Dalrymple the curate, who had that day taken the service, who observed the two little kneeling figures as he passed out of the tiny vestry on his way out.

Mr. Dalrymple knew the children quite well by that time, and was on friendly terms with them and with their big brother ; but he had not seen indications of any great seriousness in either of them so far, and therefore he was a little surprised at their

attitude that morning. Moreover, he was a little puzzled by the absence of Curly's flowing locks, and as he had heard that the children had distinguished themselves somewhat the previous night, he thought he would wait and have a chat with them by-and-by, and hear what they had to say about it all.

But as he stood waiting for them to come out, watching them from the position he had taken up in the doorway, he felt certain by the heaving of Bunny's shoulders that he was crying bitterly, and presently Curly lifted his face and said quite audibly,

"Don't cry so, Bunny. If you do, you'll make me cry too, and I do so want to be brave. If we cry, it will make us seem like girls, and it won't do any good."

And at those words the curate became aware that there was something troubling the little boys; and coming forward, he laid a kindly hand on Curly's head.

"Is anything the matter, my little man?" he asked in the low tones suitable to such a spot. "Is something troubling you?"

"I'm going to prison to-day," answered Curly seriously but steadily. "I'm just going to give myself up to justice, and I don't know if I shall ever see anybody I care for again, because I think perhaps they may hang me; and we stayed to say our last prayers together here. I feel better now

because I've asked God to take care of me even in prison, and I think He will. It's Bunny who cries about it. I don't mean to cry if I can help it. I want to be brave. I feel happier than I did when I was telling a lie about it."

Mr. Dalrymple did not smile, for he saw that it was all very serious and real to the children.

"I am glad you brought your trouble here," he said. "You could not have taken it to a better place. But now will you come out with me and tell me all about it? Perhaps I might be able to help you over the danger. At any rate, we can see what can be done."

Bunny looked up with eager gratitude, and they both rose and followed their friend out into the little quiet cloister-walk outside; and when they were all seated in the embrasure of one of the windows he said,

"That's what I say. I feel sure Granny, or Phyl, or Tor would help us, only Curly says it would be misprision of treason to hide him or keep him safe, and we won't have anybody got into trouble for him, he says."

Mr. Dalrymple could not restrain a smile, though he laid his hand approvingly on the shorn head of the younger boy, over which the short curls were beginning to cluster in little close rings. The likeness between him and Tor was coming out very strongly now.

“That is a brave boy, not to wish to involve anybody else in his trouble. And now, Curly, suppose you tell me all about it, and let us see if anything can be done.”

“I let the cows into the hayfield, and they trod it down and spoiled a great deal of it. And when I heard them say the man who did it would be sent to prison and perhaps hanged, I told a lie, and said I hadn't done it, and I've been *so* miserable since; and I thought last night if I could only do something to help Granny, and make up a little for the harm I'd done, I'd tell all about it in the morning, and go to prison; and now I'm going to—I'd rather be in prison than go about feeling so mean.”

The clergyman patted the child's head approvingly. He had heard all about the occurrence of a few days back, and the suspicion which attached to the little boy, and was very glad to hear his own account of the matter, and understand that there had been stronger temptation than anyone had known for the falsehood of which he had been guilty.

“I'm going to tell Granny first,” he concluded, “and then I shall go to the policeman and tell him, and give myself up.” And the child's face expressed a firmness that was not without a touch of heroism in it.

“Yes, you should certainly tell Lady Chesterton

first, and then she will tell you what ought to be your next step; but as she is very busy this morning, and will hardly have time to attend to your affairs, suppose you come home with me and see my sister, and I will go back with you when the time comes, if you like, and help you to get out the confession."

"Oh, thank you," answered Curly, "you *are* kind. I should like to be free one more day—if you do not think it would be cowardly to put it off."

"No, my dear little boy, I do not think it would. And I think, too, you will find, Curly, that you have got your liberty from to-day. You have been a sort of prisoner all this time, but you have broken your chain now, and I hope you will never fix it on yourself again."

Curly looked up puzzled, but he was too much used to hear talk above his head to be very curious as to what Mr. Dalrymple meant. The idea of going home with him and seeing his pretty, kind sister, who kept house for him, was pleasant, and there was something in the relief of having made his confession to a clergyman, and of having got the ice well broken, that could not but bring with it much relief. He could not draw back or turn coward now; and though he knew all, Mr. Dalrymple had not been cross, and had held out some vague hopes of bringing matters to a somewhat

more hopeful conclusion than the little brothers had dared to think possible.

As for Edith Dalrymple, she laughed so much when she heard their story that at first they thought her almost unkind, only that she made amends by a great deal of sympathy afterwards, and was so sure that something would be done to lighten the little boy's punishment that Bunny's spirits rose wonderfully, and even Curly began to hope that there might be some "extenuating circumstances" brought out in his favour to soften the hearts of the dreaded police. And then Edith did not laugh about the falsehood he had told, but talked quite gravely over that, and when they had exhausted the subject she tried to make them enjoy themselves by taking them round her little garden and showing them her tame birds in her little aviary, who would come and sit on her finger or her shoulder, and who would take seeds from her lips or ferret about for them in her hair. She made Curly very happy by promising that if he went to prison he should take one of her tamest birds with him, and it almost seemed to the little boy as if that would make up for everything.

Edith Dalrymple came from a house where were plenty of little brothers and sisters, so that she understood the ways of children and made a delightful companion. She was Phyl's greatest friend too,

and was immensely interested in the account of the rescue of the poor suffocated fowls the previous evening, as well as of the fire itself; and the morning slipped away so fast that when Mr. Dalrymple came to tell them that it was time to be going home, they could hardly believe his watch could be right.

However, they both left the house in a much more cheerful frame of mind than they had entered it; and though Curly could not but fear that he had seen the last of pretty Miss Dalrymple for a long time to come, yet he remembered the promise of the bird, and found great consolation in the thought.

Granny was at liberty to talk to them when the curate led the pair into her cool north parlour, whither she had retired for a little rest after the busy morning of discussion and examination necessary after the casualty of the previous night; and she looked rather surprised, though not at all displeased, when the trio made their appearance.

Curly did not flinch or hesitate. He did not even wait for the clergyman to pave the way. He disengaged his hand from that of his friend and walked straight up to Granny.

“I want to tell you that it was I who let the cows into the hayfield the other night. I did it for fun. I didn't know it would do so much harm; but I

knew it was naughty, and I want you to know it was I."

"I knew it all the time, Curly."

Curly stared and started, hardly believing his ears.

"But you didn't send me to prison."

Granny did not speak for a moment, and Mr. Dalrymple took the opportunity of saying,

"Curly heard some talk the next morning which made him think the penalty of the offence was imprisonment, or even capital punishment, which is the main reason why he could not make up his mind to speak out before. But he is prepared now to bear the full penalty. He is convinced that it would be better to go to prison, if need be, than to have a lie upon his conscience."

Granny put out her hand and drew the child towards her.

"Is that so, little man? Do you really feel that it would be better to be punished as severely as that, rather than feel that you are deceiving us any longer?"

Curly nodded vehemently. He was half afraid he might cry if Granny looked at him in that kind way much longer. The excitement through which he had passed during the past hours had had its effect upon him, and though his resolution did not flinch, he felt terribly afraid he might disgrace himself by tears.

“Curly never, never told a lie before,” broke in Bunny with great vehemence, “and he’ll never do it again, I know, because it’s made him so mis’rable. And oh, Granny, if he does go to prison, mayn’t I go too? I’d much rather be with him there than free anywhere else.”

“No, no, no!” cried Curly. “Granny, don’t let him. I won’t have him punished too. And, Bunny, you’ve got to be outside to help to escape me. You couldn’t do anything if you were shut up too.”

The children were getting so excited, and the tears were so very near, that Granny thought it time to come to the rescue.

“My little boys,” she said, drawing them both to her, “I am glad to see you both so brave and so much attached to one another, but I cannot have you distress yourselves any more over this matter. It is not a case of prison at all. It was a piece of mischief that deserved some punishment, but not of such a kind; and I am sure the author of it has suffered enough as it is. What really grieved and troubled me most was the lie which Curly told, which seemed so unnecessary, as you have never been treated harshly by any one since you came to my house. But I understand better now why it was, and am very glad to find how heavily it weighed upon your conscience, Curly. Now that you have told all the truth we will say no more

about it, and I think you will have learnt, without any preaching from me, that the worst kind of prison and the worst kind of bondage that can happen to us is when we put ourselves into Satan's power by yielding to temptation and letting him bind his heavy chains upon us, which grow heavier and heavier the longer we wear them, and which are more and more difficult to break as time goes by."

Curly looked up quickly first at Granny and then at Mr. Dalrymple. He was still a good deal bewildered, but a perception was beginning to enter his head that after all things were not going to be so bad for him as he had believed.

"Was that what you meant too?"

"Yes, Curly; don't you think it is true?"

"Oh, Granny!" burst in Bunny, ecstatically, "and may Curly really go free, and aren't you going to prosecute? And will it not be counted misprision of treason if you don't?"

"Bless the children! where do they get their ideas and their fine words from? No, my dears, there is no penalty attaching to the offence your brother has committed (if you can't understand plain, simple language, perhaps you can understand grand words like that). Curly is forgiven because he has manfully confessed his fault, as he would have been days ago if he could have made up his mind to be as brave as he is now. I am very glad that

the cloud has all blown away, and I hope the lesson you will both learn from it is, firstly, not to get into wilful mischief, from the idea that it is going to be such great fun ; and secondly, that if you have done so, not to be afraid of speaking the truth about it. And I might add, thirdly, not to pay too much heed to the chance words of gossip you pick up from uneducated people, who do not always know what they are talking about any better than you do yourselves."

And so, with a smile and a nod, Granny dismissed her two little visitors, whilst Mr. Dalrymple lingered behind to tell his tale ; and in the midst Phyl came in, and if the children could have heard all that passed they might have been a good deal surprised at hearing themselves so much praised. As it was, they were almost oppressed by the magnitude of the deliverance that had come to them, and squeezing up close together they climbed up to their own nurseries to pour out the whole story to the kind and sympathetic Hannah, who almost shed tears to think what they must have suffered whilst they believed such a penalty as that hung over their heads.

"You might have told old Hannah, honey," she said, kissing the little faces that were damp with the few tears that had forced their way out in spite of every attempt to check them. "Bless your innocent little hearts ! did you think us all so hard-hearted as

to let you be took to prison all for a bit of a joke?"

"Oh no, I knew you would all be sorry; but it doesn't do to resist the law, you know. In France they had something they called the 'justice of the king'—perhaps they have it still—and it meant that if people resisted the law, all sorts of dreadful things happened to them; and they might in England too, perhaps."

"Bless your little hearts! you've stuffed your pretty heads a deal too full of them old history books, which might frighten honest folks to death if they didn't know it was all make-believe, or leastways that folks know better in these days. There, there, dearies, don't go for to think about it any more. I'm sure you didn't mean no harm, and you was fair frightened into a bit of a story, which I'm sure you'll never tell another. You've had a sharp bit of a lesson, and you won't forget it in a hurry."

Curly was quite sure he never should; and it was such a relief to have all concealment off his mind that he was as certain as child could be that a lie was worse than any punishment.

"I must tell Tor all about it," he said, "and then I shall feel quite happy again."

But he could not go to Tor with his story that day, for he was shut up with one of his very worst headaches, and could bear no kind of light or sound,

and only Hannah had the right of going in and out at will. Tor was suffering from the effects of the exertions he had made at the fire; and whilst he was shut up in his room knowing nothing at all about what was going on, other people were praising him, and Granny was telling all her friends that, so far as she could see, she owed the preservation of her house to the coolness and presence of mind of her grandson, who saw what alone could save the main block of the buildings, and by precept and example urged and shamed the men into working with right good will to stay the approach of the fire, which, without those efforts, must have got such a grip of the buildings before the firemen came that in all probability the fine old house would have fallen a victim to the conflagration.

The children always listened with great interest to what was said in praise of Tor; and Curly, too, not unfrequently came in for his share of laudation for the prompt and fearless way he had rescued the poor fowls, when the nearer danger to the house had engrossed the minds of all the spectators. Phyl had rewarded him by giving him some of her very best chickens for his own, and so he had resigned to Bunny his share of the brood Granny had made over to them, and they each had their own special hen and chicks, and very absorbing did they find the care of the little fluffy things to be.

It was almost like the beginning of their own farm, they thought, when Granny said they could keep their coops under an open shed at the corner of the paddock, and bring up their young families apart from all the rest. And soon a nice little black donkey made his appearance in the paddock, and the delighted children heard that he was intended for their especial use and behoof, and that they might drive him about in the little varnished cart which stood in the coach-house, and which had once belonged to Phyl when she had been too young to drive big horses. And as the little boys had a great idea of being independent and doing everything for themselves, they coaxed Tor, as soon as he was out again, to show them how to harness the donkey, and how to wash the cart when it came in ; and though they managed to get themselves in a fine mess over this last operation, Granny said they were quite right in liking to wait upon themselves, and encouraged them to learn all they could, and be as little dependent upon servants as need be.

“And if you are ever to be little farmers, you cannot learn such things too young,” she said with a smile ; and as this was the first time she had ever taken notice of their aspirations, it impressed them a good deal. “You may change your minds as you grow older, but knowledge never comes amiss to

any of us; so learn all you can whilst you have the chance."

The little boys were not slow to follow this advice, and every facility was given them when it once became apparent that they were in earnest over their work. They were allowed to dig up little plots of ground in "their paddock," as they soon learned to call it, and plant vegetables and flowers there; and though they had begun a little late to see much result, yet their satisfaction was just as great as if they had the whole season before them. They consulted the books in the library with the greatest zeal, cross-questioned Tor till he used to say his life was made a burden to him, and wandered all over the farm with Phyl or Granny, listening to her talks with the farm-men, and asking all manner of questions about crops and stocks—for all the world like the little originals that Phyl had first dubbed them.

They had very grand plans of their own just then. They were going, with the help of Tor, to make a sort of house out of the open shed which now seemed their very own, and when that matter was accomplished they were going to spend their accumulated pocket-money in a few necessary articles of furniture, and finally take up their abode there, and farm the paddock so successfully that not only should they be able to keep themselves in

comfort, but pay a little rent to Granny for the use of her land.

There were to be oats in one patch of the land, wheat in another, mangel-wurzel in another, and potatoes in another. The rest was to be left in grass for the donkey and the chickens, and they reckoned on their fowls for supplying them with breakfast-eggs and poultry for the table, as well as for a margin to send to market and to help them in stocking their farmery.

“I do think p'raps Granny might give us a little cow, and then we could make milk and butter too, and then we should get lots of money and could buy another; or perhaps a pig—I know pigs are very profitable, and we could get plenty of pig-wash from the kitchen to feed it on. I know cook would let us come for it if we didn't make a mess. I can't think why Tor says farming isn't a paying concern. I know ours will pay—he'd better just wait and see how we manage. Then perhaps he'll join with us, and then we could do more. He's got a lot of money, though he says he hasn't. I saw it in a drawer. I should think he's got four or five pounds. One could make *anything* pay with a capital like that.”

Curly looked much impressed, as he always did when Bunny used a word he did not understand.

“Yes, wouldn't it be capital! I wish we had as

much. But Phyl is very good-natured, and so is Granny too. They will give us a lot of things, I dare say, when once we're started. I wonder how soon we might begin."

"We must get a lease of the land first," said Bunny with an air of authority.

"What's that?"

"Well, I know, but I don't think I can quite explain; but we ought not to begin to lay out any money on the property till we have got one. I do know *that*. I wonder if Tor could tell us how to get it."

Bunny ran off to ask, and presently came back with a piece of paper in his hand, and a forehead puckered into lines of solemn gravity.

"Well, he wasn't in one of his best moods, and he didn't care to be bothered much; but he answered some of my questions, and so I think I can do it; only we'd better go into the library and get a big sheet of paper with lines, and I think we ought to make a great seal on it when it's done, because I don't think any paper is valid without being signed and sealed."

Curly's eyes were round with admiration and awe. He did think Bunny was clever to know so much, and he watched him with the closest attention as he took a sheet of foolscap and began his laborious task.

It was no easy matter to get the deed drawn up. Curly would have given it up in despair very soon, but Bunny plodded on with great deliberation, and some satisfaction at the even look of his best writing. It took him quite an hour to complete the document, and then, with a face flushed with the pride of success, he called Curly to him to listen to it.

So he cleared his throat and began.

“‘In Chancery, this first day of June, 1886. O yes, O yes, O yes.’”

“What does that mean?” asked Curly, with his elbows on the table and a look of keen interest on his face.

“Well, I don’t quite know; but legal documents always begin with a preamble, and I thought that was a nice one.”

“So it is; very nice indeed. Go on.”

“‘Whereas the venerable Lady Chesterton has a paddock that she doesn’t want and we do, and whereas the said Bunny and Curly her august grandsons are willing to pay a just and lawful rent for the said paddock and all the appurtenances thereof, it is hereby agreed that the said Granny shall let them have it to do as they like with for a period not exceeding seventy years, and that we shall give her in lieu of the said paddock and his appurtenances the sum of one shilling per quarter, to be taken off our pocket-money when papa gives

it to us, and that the defendants shall have the right to do as they like with the paddock and build a house upon it, and that the said Granny will perhaps be so very kind as to give them some stock to start us, as we have only got a few chickens and a donkey (which is really yours) to begin with.

“‘God save the Queen. Signed, Bunny and Curly.’”

“Oh, Bunny, how nice it sounds—only I didn’t sign.”

“No, I did it for you. I thought you wouldn’t write well enough. I think it would be best for me to sign for Granny too. It always looks so much better for a document to be in one handwriting.”

“Then why don’t you sign for her?”

“Oh, because she must agree to it first, and then somebody will sign. If I did it without leave it would be forgery.”

Curly heaved a great sigh.

“Oh, Bunny, what a lot you do know! I think you ought to be a lawyer instead of a farmer.”

“Well,” answered Bunny, thoughtfully, “I’ve heard people say that a knowledge of the law is useful to everybody, whatever they are, and you see how useful it has been to us already; for if we had had to get a lawyer to draw our lease he might have charged quite half-a-crown for it, and now we’ve got it for nothing. But let us go and talk to Granny now.”

## CHAPTER IX

BUT in the end the lease was not taken straight to Granny. There was not sufficient sealing-wax in the library to satisfy Bunny's aspirations in the matter of seals, and it was judged better to submit the document first to Tor, to see what he said to it, and to enlist his help in the matter.

Tor was gradually getting over the effects of the fire, though his exertions on that night had hindered his recovery and thrown him back a good deal; but then, on the other hand, Granny had seemed to think a great deal of him ever since, was always praising him behind his back, and consulting him about different things when he found his way downstairs, and it was quite plain even to the children that their brother began to occupy an important position in their grandmother's house, and that he was appreciated as much as even they had dared to hope.

He was very kind, too, about the lease, read it through and pronounced it a first-rate article of its kind, complimented Bunny on his legal acumen—





IN THE PADDOCK.

whatever that was—and did even more than they had ventured to hope for its embellishment.

He made the most beautiful flourishes to all the capitals, which could not fail, as Bunny explained to Curly, to make it absolutely valid in the eyes of the law ; and at the suggestion of the little lawyer, added the letters Q. E. D. in illuminated capitals at the end, and then he actually gave them sixpence to expend in the purchase of sealing-wax, and himself made three huge and impressive seals, such as the little brothers associated in their minds with the charters and ancient documents they had seen in the British Museum on visits there ; and really when that was accomplished their cup of satisfaction seemed full, and they almost felt as if they were already the possessors of the coveted paddock.

Tor quite entered into all their plans. He came down to look at the shed, and told them just what would be wanted to make it into a sort of hut, such as backwoodsmen would live in. Indeed he did not stop short with telling only, but he got a few planks from the carpenter and some rough fir-trunks from the wood-barn, and soon began to give an air of possible habitation to the place, whilst the little brothers worked with a right good will, and were as much astonished as enchanted at the rapidity with which the shed was transformed.

It is true that there were big gaps between the

planks and fir-posts which made a semblance of wall, but Tor instructed them to go and get fern and furze and stuff it in as a further protection. There was lots of last year's dead brake to be had in the woods, and the little boys got quite clever in nailing up little cross-way pieces and twisting in the brown fern, which gave a very picturesque look to their house, and made it resemble, at least in their own eyes, one of the ancient dwelling-places of the early Britons.

"I don't know if we *ought* to improve the property so much before the lease is signed," Bunny once remarked to Tor; but he answered that it might be well for Granny to see, before the request was made, what good tenants she was going to secure by the bargain to be struck; and that quite satisfied both children, who decided to do all they could for the adornment of their hut before the great document was posted at all.

Bunny was determined that it should go through the post.

"It's so much more business-like, you know," he explained to Curly. "Papa often says so to the girls when they want him to arrange something for them instead of writing; and when Granny is a little less busy, we'll send it; but Phyl says she is too busy just now to want to have anything else important on her mind."

Curly was always willing to be guided by his wise elder brother, and it was easy to see that Granny *was* very busy just now, and had a good deal on her mind. She wrote a great many letters every day, and had her great books often on the table beside her, and spent long hours poring over them and making calculations. She had long interviews with her bailiff too, and altogether the children got the idea that something important and rather mysterious was on foot; but nobody seemed to know what it was except Phyl, and she kept her own counsel, only laughing when the little brothers questioned her, and telling them they were as curious as girls—which accusation always closed Curly's lips and made him feel very indignant.

And yet they could not help feeling that the secrets which were evidently afoot were in some way connected with themselves—how much they could not determine; but they were certain from Phyl's manner, as well as from hints unwittingly dropped by old Hannah, that they should find out in the end that there was some connection with themselves and their affairs. They could not imagine what it could be, and Tor only laughed at them, and told them they fancied it all. He did not seem as much aware as they were that there was some commotion going on. He told them that Granny was only busy because it was a busy time

of year, and that, as she was her own steward, she had her hands very full, especially as several of her farms were unlet and she had to farm them herself, in addition to the home-farm which she always kept in her own hands.

This explanation did not quite satisfy the little boys. However, they saw that Tor believed what he said, and could tell them nothing more ; so they bottled up their curiosity as well as they could, and gave themselves over to the improvement of their little estate, and made such progress there that they were astonished at their own skill and cleverness.

And a surprise was in store for them of which they little dreamed, and which at first filled them with an astonishment that bordered on dismay, for they could not think what it all meant, and were terribly afraid that it might be the beginning of the downfall of all their brightest hopes.

For this surprise was nothing more nor less than a sudden incursion from London of their father, accompanied by three of the girls.

It happened the very day after that on which they had posted to Granny the important document in which they had taken such pride and delight. The posting had been a serious matter, for there was great fear lest the precious seals should suffer in the transit. Tor had, however, produced a

big piece of strong tin-foil in which to encase it, and they were informed by their friend Watkins on the following morning that the precious packet had been duly unearthed from the post-bag by his mistress when he had brought it to her at breakfast-time.

“Will she answer by post, or will she tell us what she means to do when we see her?” asked Curly, capering with excitement.

“I don’t know; perhaps she will send her answer through her solicitor,” answered Bunny. “Lots of people do that when it’s business, you know, though Granny seems to manage her own affairs herself generally. She didn’t say anything about it after chapel, as she might have done. I dare say she wants time to consider about it. When people are big they take a very long time to make up their minds, especially when things are important. I’ve often noticed that about them.”

“Let’s go to our hut and see how it looks. Do you think she will come and see what we have done? You know we’ve never told her what we’ve been doing—only Phyl and Tor.”

“I dare say Phyl has told her. I think Phyl would be pleased for us to squat here. She likes us.”

“To squat? What’s that? I shall run about mostly; I don’t care about squatting.”

“Oh, but I mean squatting in its technical sense,” replied Bunny; at which mysterious phrase Curly looked so astonished that he condescended to explain—Tor having used the mysterious expression to him shortly before, in Curly’s absence, so that he felt in a position to show off his superior knowledge.

“Squatting doesn’t mean what you think—at least not always. It’s what they call it in Ireland and Australia and lots of other places when people take a piece of land that nobody wants and settle there, and cultivate it for themselves, and pay just a little rent or perhaps no rent for it. We mean to pay Granny, of course; but Tor called us squatters—I thought it was rather a nice name.”

Curly thought so too, and they played very happily at being squatters all that morning, and were more eager than ever to have a favourable answer to their request; but when they ran towards the house, when the preparation-gong had sounded shortly before luncheon, they saw the carriage just driving away to the stable-yard, as though somebody had been out that morning; and it was so unusual for Granny or Phyl to drive out in the forenoon that they were quite surprised, and wondered what could have happened to make them break their usual habits.

“Perhaps Granny went to consult her solicitor,”

suggested Bunny, and on the whole that seemed the most probable solution of the riddle.

Hannah was smiling rather mysteriously as she helped them to wash their faces and brush their hair before they went downstairs, and she made them change their jackets, too, and spruce themselves up with unusual care; and then it occurred to them that perhaps the carriage had brought visitors to lunch, and Hannah said this was so, though she did not say who the visitors were, and the children did not feel interested enough to ask, though they might easily have wormed the secret out of Hannah. They were rather sorry people had come, as it might hinder Granny from giving them an answer concerning the paddock, about which they were growing quite excited.

“You can run down to the drawing-room, dearies, and see the company,” said Hannah when they were ready; and as the little brothers approached the door of that room, they looked at one another in startled dismay, for in the sound of voices and laughter which proceeded thence they clearly recognised the tones of their father and the girls—or at least some of them; and the horrid idea seized upon both of them at once that their relatives had come for the express purpose of carrying them off home again.

“And before our lease is signed!” whispered

Curly in accents of despair. "Shall we run away before they have seen us? Could we hide in our hut till they have gone?"

Bunny shook his head gloomily.

"They may be here for days—it's no good trying to escape; the only thing to do now is to wait and see what they mean to do, and if we can't stand it, we can appeal."

"Who to?" asked Curly in a whisper.

"Oh, I don't quite know straight off; but people always can appeal, you know, if things are not fair. There's the Court of Chancery, you know, and the Court of Common Pleas, and lots of others too; and I believe one can appeal to the House of Lords if nobody else will do one justice."

So Curly, somewhat relieved by the thought of future possibilities, and full of confidence in his brother's powers to find a way out of any difficulty, put a bold face on the matter, and marched into the room with his manliest air.

Yes, they had not been mistaken. There was papa, sitting by Granny, and "Miss," who looked rather black and dignified, listening rather than talking to Phyl; whilst Ethel and Madge were on the sofa, one on each side of Tor, and were chattering away to him very fast, full of spirits as usual, and not at all embarrassed, as it seemed, by the novelty of this family gathering at the Priory.

The entrance of the little boys effected a diversion, and everybody turned to look at them.

“Oh Curly, Curly, your hair!” cried Madge. “What have you done with your curls?”

“Oh, they got burnt up the night of the fire, and Phyl cut them off with her scissors,” answered the child, complacently stroking his cropped head with its little rings of yellow silk. “It saves a lot of trouble. My hair doesn’t take any longer to do than Bunny’s now.”

“And you look just like a small edition of Tor,” remarked Ethel.

This comparison, which was not unfrequently made in these days, always pleased Curly very much, and he was more gracious than he had intended to be in his greetings to his relatives, whose motives in this sudden appearance had seemed to him at the least suspicious. However, the announcement of lunch prevented any explanation from being offered then, and it was only when the meal was ended, and Madge, who was youthful enough to enjoy an escape from the elders, had run off with them into the garden, that they learnt what it was all about. Madge seemed in great good-humour, though her words savoured something of a reproach.

“You little wretches! what sort of things have you been saying of us? Do you know what a revo-

lution you have effected amongst you—you and Tor together—in the household? Maud doesn't bless you, I can tell you. She is awfully offended by it all; but I don't think it will be half bad myself. One is rather sick of things going all anyhow."

"I don't understand," said Bunny. "What is going to happen? and what have we done?"

"Don't you know anything about it? Hasn't anybody told you?"

"No; Granny doesn't talk to us about grown-up sort of things. We don't do things here as you do at home. They go right of themselves, without any fuss."

Madge laughed at this remark.

"Yes, I suppose so—or rather. Granny, as you call her, knows how to manage without all the fuss that Maud makes over her arrangements. Well, anyhow, there's to be a change now. We are to have a proper chaperon and companion, and she is to manage the house and the servants, and we are not to go about just as we like and manage things our own way any more. Some of them are furious; but I don't think I mind. I often think when I go to other girls' homes that they are much nicer than ours, though they don't do so much just what they like."

This was all very surprising indeed.

“But what have we got to do with it?” asked Bunny.

“Well, didn’t you first put it into Granny’s head that things were very queer at home?”

“I don’t know. We only told her what you used to say and do.”

Madge could not help laughing.

“Well, perhaps that was it—or perhaps it was the way we let Tor get so ill amongst us. It was rather a shame, but really we were so busy, and one couldn’t do him any good by sitting with him, and he did not seem to wish it, so we got into the way of just letting him alone; and Maud wanted his room for some visitors of hers, and stuck him up in a poky little hole that made him worse—and that was a shame I admit, though, as he didn’t say anything, we did not know he minded it much. And at any rate he can be grateful to us now. For it has led to all this good luck for him—and I know papa thinks he is an uncommonly fortunate fellow now.”

“Oh, is he? I’m so glad. What has happened to him?”

“Don’t you know?”

“No, we don’t know anything.”

“What! not that grandmother is going to make him her land-agent, and put him into one of her empty farms hereabouts to live, and let him man-

age her property for her, now that she is getting old, with a nice little income for his trouble?"

"No, we did not know. Oh, Bunny, isn't it just what we always advised Granny to do? Oh, how delicious! And, Bunny, if we can't squat on Granny's paddock, we will go and squat on his farm; and perhaps when he sees how well we manage, he will take us on as labourers or something. You might be his solicitor, you know, Bunny, when he wanted to know about the law."

But Bunny was looking at Madge rather suspiciously. Was she going to tell them that they were to come back to town when the others of their family left? After all, they had paid Granny a long visit as it was; and although *he* saw no valid reason why he and Curly should not set up for themselves in their precious hut, he was aware that the project might not appeal to the minds of grown-up folks as a very feasible one.

"Curly and I think of setting up for ourselves," he remarked in an off-hand, independent way, though he was watching Madge's face rather closely all the time. "We don't care about living in London; the country suits us much better."

Madge laughed as she said,

"Oh, so you have been coming round on the soft side of Granny, have you? Getting her to fight

your battle and win papa over to your plans? Wise children!"

The little boys looked at each other and at Madge, and wondered what these words meant.

"We've always told people that we want to live in the country and have a farm, but we did not know Granny meant to give us one. Is she going to, Madge? Is she going to let us have the hut, and squat on the paddock? "

It was Madge's turn to stare now, as she said,

"I don't know what you are talking about; but don't you know that you are to go to the Dalrymples' soon—Mr. Dalrymple is a clergyman, I believe, and has a sister living with him—to be his pupils? He has time, it seems, for a pair of shrimps like you, and as he isn't rich, he will be very glad of the care of you, and he and his sister are to teach you between them, and Granny will look after you and see that you are properly cared for. That's chiefly what papa and Maud have come about—to see Mr. and Miss Dalrymple and arrange about you. As you've had your holidays now, you are to begin lessons there pretty soon—as soon as matters are properly settled. Do you mean that you did not know?"

The astonished faces of the little pair gave answer sufficient. It was plain that they had never heard a word about all this before.

“ But Miss Mertens—won’t she come back any more—won’t she be sorry?”

“ Oh no, that’s partly what set it going. Miss Mertens’ uncle in Australia, that she used to talk about, has sent for her to go over to him and keep house for him, and as soon as she’s well enough she will go. She wrote to tell us she was not coming back, and that made papa write to Granny for advice about another governess—and then came all this hullabaloo.”

“ What hullabaloo?”

“ Oh, about the way things were going on at home. You know Granny is not one to interfere in other people’s affairs, but when papa asked her advice, she said very decidedly that she advised your not being educated at home any longer, as there did not seem a very desirable tone in the household—or something of that sort—and of course that set papa in a fuss, and he wrote a lot of times, and routed about and got in a fluster; and the end of it all is that we are to have a dragoness to take care of us, and that you are to go to Mr. Dalrymple to be educated. And Tor is to be Granny’s land-agent and live down here too, and that is why Ethel and I said we’d come too. We should like to see his new house, and perhaps help him to furnish it—if he doesn’t bear malice for the way we treated him when he was in disgrace.”

“Isn't he in disgrace now, then?”

“Oh no; he's not a failure any longer, now that Granny has taken him up. Indeed his prospects are better than any of the boys', except Ronald's, now. Granny is a rich woman, and can do as she likes with her money. It seems very likely, under present circumstances, that she will make Tor her heir.”

The little brothers did not quite understand, but they thought it sounded very interesting and rather romantic.

“Tor likes Granny, and Granny likes him. They are always teasing one another, but they are quite fond of each other, I know.”

“Yes, that is very plain; Tor always was the one in the family who liked her, and was not afraid of the rough side of her tongue. We had our chance, and we all of us lost it; so it is fair he should have his turn.”

“And about our paddock—oh, Madge, will you come to see it? *Do* you think we can squat there, if we live at Mr. Dalrymple's?”

And as Madge was hurried off to look at the paddock and its precious hut, the whole story was poured into her ears; and though she was not as sympathetic and interested as Phyl over the children's concerns, still she was very merry and good-natured, and laughed a great deal at most of the

things they said, and declared that she thought Granny might very likely give it them to play on just as they liked, though she did not seem to understand that what they wanted was, not play, but to undertake serious farming operations which were to be productive and lucrative. She admired their hut a good deal, however, and thought it did them great credit, though she would not do anything but laugh when they explained how it was to be made into a real living-place for themselves and their stock. And whilst they were in the midst of their explanations, who should approach the spot but Granny herself, and with her the whole of the party; and in her hands she carried the lease, and both she and the children's father, though grave enough now, looked as if they had been laughing a good deal not long before.

Curly could restrain his impatience no longer, but rushed eagerly up to the advancing party.

"Oh, Granny, have you come to sign the lease? Do you know Bunny drew it up his very own self? I dare say you thought it had been done by a solicitor—didn't you? But I do assure you it was Bunny. He does know such a lot about the law. And oh, Granny dear, *will* you sign it, please? For we do so want it—and we will be *such* good farmers that I'm sure you will never be sorry."

And with a smiling face Granny held out the

imposing document to him ; and Curly saw beneath their own names, written by Bunny, a new and imposing word added, and this word he made out to be "GRANNY," written in flourishing capitals ; and with a little shriek of delight he ran back to his brother.

"Bunny, Bunny, she has signed it, she has signed it ! It is really ours—our very own. Oh, you *are* a dear nice Granny ! Oh, what lovely times we will have now !"

And when Bunny had examined the document, and had assured himself that the signature was really "valid"—a thing he was always very particular about, as Curly informed the company after a whispered consultation with his brother over the deed—both little boys proceeded to do the honours of their hut and the paddock they had become possessed of on lease, and were eager to explain the methods of farming to be carried out there, and how they were going to make their fortunes off it.

"But how are you going to feed all your animals ?" asked the father ; and Curly smiled at such evidence of cockney ignorance.

"Why, don't you know, in the country things are always there, just as you want them. There is pig-wash in the tub outside the back door, and corn for the chickens in the granary—and Phyl has a key, so we can always borrow it when we want—and hay

and straw and everything, all quite handy. In London there isn't anything like that, but here it all comes of itself. We've nothing to do but to buy the animals—and perhaps Granny will give them to us—and they can keep themselves, you see. That's why farming here will be so profitable. We sha'n't have to buy anything."

"Very profitable indeed. I should not mind owning a farm myself under such conditions," returned the father; "but how are the lessons to get on if you are busy all day on the land?"

Bunny and Curly exchanged doubtful glances, and then Granny spoke.

"The lessons are to be the first object, and I hope Mr. and Miss Dalrymple will have good and attentive pupils. The paddock is to be farmed in play-hours; and if it causes the little farmers to be idle, the lease will be revoked—"

"By special act of Parliament," added Tor, with a stern look at the children which filled them with awe.

"But so that their crops and stock shall not suffer when their own time is taken up, I will give instructions for all deficiencies to be supplied by the labourers on my farm; only Bunny and Curly must undertake the management of the crops, and do as much with their own hands as time will allow. The amount of stock contributed by Granny will depend

upon the good account she receives from Mr. Dalrymple of his little pupils."

"Well, that is a fine inducement to industry. Come, children, what have you to say to your kind grandmother? I know what I should have thought of such an offer when I was a little boy."

The beaming faces of the children showed that they were quite sensible of the kindness of Granny, and their thanks were eagerly expressed. They had a good deal to ask, too, about their new home at Mr. Dalrymple's, and how often they were to be allowed to come "home," as they phrased it, to the Priory, and the answers they got seemed very satisfactory.

"For the present, till you are used to your new surroundings, you shall spend your Sundays here," Granny said, to the great delight of the little boys; "and you can play and work as much of your spare time as you will in your paddock here, though I think it would be better for you not to be always in the gardens and shrubberies. You will have quite enough here to take up your time, and you can go out in the donkey-cart when you please, provided you wash the cart and rub over the harness yourselves, unless the men offer to do it for you. I shall see you at morning chapel every day—at least I hope so—and we shall always meet on Saturday afternoon when you come to spend your half-holi-

day and to sleep. But you must not come running in and out as if you lived here. That I should not approve of. It would not be good for you or pleasant for your tutors. You must remember that you are under discipline there, and try and do credit to your name and training."

So Bunny and Curly promised to be very good, and resolved that there should be no cause of complaint against them; and they were so much excited and so happy by all that had happened that they were obliged to rush away to one of their loneliest haunts to talk it all over together.

## CHAPTER X

THE next excitement was to go and see the house in which Tor was to live when he should take upon himself the post of land-agent to Granny.

A party was organised the very next day to drive the two and a half miles that separated this farm from the Priory, and Bunny and Curly started ahead in their donkey-cart, eager to be the first in the field.

“I’m afraid poor Tor will be rather lonely out here all by himself,” remarked Curly, as they drove along the narrow lane which led to the farm. “It seems a pity we could not go and live with him, instead of at Mr. Dalrymple’s. I suppose he got used to being a good deal alone out in Australia; but it would have been nice if we could have lived with him and helped him.”

“Yes, but I suppose we must get educated first. Tor went to school and all that sort of thing before he turned farmer.”

“Yes, I know; but it seems such a long time to have to go on with lessons, when one might be

doing much more sensible things. That nice old farmer who came with our donkey, the other day, told us he was no scholar, and had had no schooling to speak of all his life, and he looked as nice as could be, and Granny said he was the best of her tenants for good farming and regular payments. So I don't see what good education does. Do you think we might ask Granny to let us stop learning, and live with Tor, and only do farming?"

But Bunny shook his head at that.

"No, I don't think we ought to ask for anything more; I think we have got a great deal as it is. Think, Curly: we are going to live in the country, and to spend our Sundays with Granny and Phyl, and have the paddock for our own, and do as we like, and Granny will help us with the things we want. I think it would be quite greedy to ask for anything more; and as they like us to be diligent and good over our lessons, I think we ought to try with all our might. And it's much nicer not to be ignorant and to have to ask other people what everything means. I want to be a learned man as well as a farmer. So I shall try to like my lessons better than ever."

"Well, if you do, I suppose I must too," answered Curly, who was not by nature so studious as his brother, nor fired with such laudable zeal. "But I should have thought you knew almost

enough as it is, Bunny. You know a lot more than I do."

"I'm afraid I can't consider my education finished—as the girls do," was the sober answer. "I say, Curly, isn't it funny that what we said to Granny about the girls and things has made such a lot of fuss? I'm afraid Miss is very cross with us; but we didn't mean any harm, did we?"

Curly shook his head.

"No; and Madge isn't cross, nor Ethel—I like them better here than I did at home. I don't know how it is, but everybody seems to get nicer here than they were before. I wonder why it is. I wonder if we are nicer too."

That was a question which neither little brother could answer, but Bunny after a thoughtful silence continued the subject in his own fashion.

"People don't like to be cross or snappish or silly and flighty when Granny is there. She has a way of making them seem small—don't you know what I mean?"

"Yes, like when Ethel was talking in her silly giggling way about her partners at the ball, and Miss about her fine clothes. I didn't quite understand what Granny said, but it made them both get very red, and they didn't do it again."

"Phyl never goes on in that silly way; that's why she didn't seem like a girl when we came first."

“Phyl says she hasn’t time to think such a lot about her fine frocks and hats and all that sort of thing,” remarked Curly. “I asked her about it one day, and why she didn’t have a lot of fellows fooling round after her like the girls, and she laughed a good deal and said she had not time for that kind of thing. You know she and Granny are always busy. Perhaps it’s that that makes them nice. Our girls never have anything to do. Bunny, I think we’d better always have plenty to do ourselves. I’m sure it helps people to be nice and sensible.”

“Why, so it does, Curly, I do believe; but I think it’s something else besides being busy.”

“Yes, Bunny—what?”

“Well, you see Granny is very kind, as well as very busy. She says sharp things, I know, and makes some people rather afraid of her; but I don’t think nice people are afraid—Phyl isn’t, nor Tor, and she has always been nice and kind to us, and she does such a lot of good too, you know.”

“Does she? How do you know?”

“Oh, I can see. Don’t you know how she works in the evenings for different things, and how the maids are always sewing and making clothes to give away? Granny buys the stuff, and gives them to poor people when they are done, and people come to her for help for such a lot of things; and she is so

kind to her tenants too, and has clubs for them to help them, and she and Phyl between them do all the work, and keep the books—and it is a lot of trouble, for Phyl said so; but they don't mind it a bit. I don't think Granny ever does mind trouble if it is doing good to other people."

Curly was silent for a while, turning this new idea over in his small brain.

"Bunny," he said at length, "I think Granny must be very good."

"So do I, Curly."

"Do you think it's being good makes her nice?"

"I think it must have something to do with it. You know there is something about her house there never was at home. I believe it is a good deal because she is good, and tries to make other people good too, that everything seems so nice."

"I shouldn't wonder if it was," answered Curly with an air of profound wisdom and conviction; "I've sometimes thought it myself, since Phyl talked to me that day about morning chapel, and making it a help. I think it was the chapel that helped me to tell the truth when I thought I should be put in prison. I've liked it ever since, and I don't often feel tired of it. I'm glad we can keep on going. If we mean to be good like Granny, I think we shall have to say a lot of prayers—and chapel is a nice

place to say them in ; it seems somehow as if one was nearer when one was there."

Curly did not say nearer to what, but Bunny understood him quite well without.

"Yes, I feel so ; and, Curly, Tor comes now every day, though we thought he wouldn't. I believe he likes it too, though he never says anything. I'm quite sure there is something about Granny that helps people to be better who come near her, whether they think about it or not."

However, there was no time to pursue the subject farther, had the little brothers wished to do so, as they had now reached their destination ; and tying the donkey up to the gate, they made their way to the farm-house, which was being cleaned down by a woman who had been led to expect the incursion of guests that afternoon.

It was a queer but decidedly attractive old place, having in former years been one of the manor-houses of the county ; though much of the original building had fallen into decay, and the more modern additions were on a humbler scale. Still most of the living-rooms were roomy, though low, and there was some ancient carving and panelling which excited the admiration and delight of the little boys.

As the previous tenants had been people in comfortable circumstances, until sudden losses had decided them to emigrate and join a relative in Can-

ada, their furniture was unusually good of its kind, and Lady Chesterton had bought it of them, and there it still stood, giving a comfortable look of habitation to the rooms, which only wanted a few signs of occupation to look quite snug and cosey.

The party who came to look over Tor's future home agreed that he was a very lucky fellow, and he seemed to agree in the verdict, for his face was brighter than it had been for many long months, with the brightness of a man who sees his life's work before him, and that work which he can do, and do well and successfully.

"Of course you shall come and see me," he said to Curly, who had suggested the idea somewhat modestly. "You and Bunny shall spend a Sunday with me here sometimes, if Granny can spare you from the Priory. Did you think I should be ungrateful enough to forget you, when you have had such a large share in promoting my good luck?"

"We?" echoed Curly in astonishment. "Why, what did we do?"

"Why, set the ball rolling, to be sure," answered Tor, laughing. "If you do not call that anything, other people do. You will never be *de trop* in my house, you will see."

Which was altogether such a perplexing answer that the children did not know what to make of it.

However, it was very interesting to go all over

the house, listen to the suggestions the different persons made, and the arrangements for the comfort of their big brother in his bachelor establishment. Their father promised a Turkey carpet and an easy chair for one of the living-rooms, which Tor decided to take into use as his "den," as he called it, and Granny said she should supply the deficiencies in the kitchen premises, and find him a respectable woman to be his housekeeper. There was very little wanting to make the house very comfortable for a young man's use, though had a lady been coming to live there a good many additions might have been needed. There were bedrooms sufficiently furnished both for himself and for any guests he might from time to time like to ask, and Madge was almost inclined to regret that she had never made herself of sufficient importance to her brother to make him desire her presence as his housekeeper. For she too had been somewhat fascinated by the view of country life she had seen during this brief visit to the Priory, and she would have enjoyed—at least for the first bright summer months—the importance and independence of being Tor's housekeeper and companion.

But it was very plain that such an idea had never entered into the head of the brother, who had been treated with scant kindness by his sisters when he really needed their good offices, and the little kind-

nesses which would have done so much for him when he first came amongst them ; and Miss Madge learnt a salutary lesson from this, that fair-weather friends are not those who really win true affection ; and she knew that sharp-spoken Granny, the little half-brothers, who had never been of much account in their eyes, and even pretty Phyllis Musgrave, who was no relation at all, were much more now to Tor than his own sisters, who might so well have held the first place in his naturally warm heart, had they not shown such flighty and unfeeling indifference towards him when he had come amongst them ill and suffering.

“ I suppose it was rather horrid of us,” she said to herself, “ but we all of us always did hate bothering after people when they were ill. Well, at any rate he can serve us out now, for he’ll never care to ask us down to see him, or think we should care to come ; but I do think it would be great fun, especially if things get *too* cut-and-dried at home with this old she-dragon who is coming. But when one won’t be kind for kindness’ sake when one has the chance, it’s a mean kind of thing to go sneaking up when there’s something to be got by it, so I sha’n’t tell Tor how I should like to see him when he has got settled in his own house.”

Which view of the case showed that Miss Madge was at least sincere and no humbug, and also that

she had learnt a lesson which we will hope she did not forget again in the busy round of pleasure and gaiety, which, in spite of all gloomy prognostications, still continued to make up the main business of the lives of herself and her sisters in their father's house.

The inspection of Tor's new home was followed next day by a visit from father and sister to Mr. Dalrymple and his sister, which ended in the satisfactory decision that the two little boys were to be sent there as boarders, to be educated by the young clergyman and his bright and merry sister; and though the little boys felt that they, if they had been consulted in the matter, should have preferred to be independent squatters in their own hut, or even to live with Tor in his big and almost empty house, still they were so pleased at being allowed to remain in the neighbourhood, instead of being taken back to London, that they entered with zest into the plans made for them, resolved to be very good and diligent, and were not the least bit fretful or repining, even when the time came for leaving their snug nurseries and good Hannah's fostering care.

"For, you see, we shall be quite near neighbours all the time," explained Curly to their kind nurse, "and we shall often be in our paddock; and if you'll come out and see us there sometimes, we'll give you some damper or dried buffalo's flesh, or something

of that sort. Squatters have to eat all sorts of queer things, you know—Tor had to once when he was in the bush, and so do men in the books we read. I expect when we begin to squat we shall find a buffalo hanging round somewhere, and then we shall shoot it and dry its flesh in the sun, and have it hanging up in our hut against we want it to cook. So if ever cook wants a fresh dish at company time, she can just come and ask us, and we'll give her some. Tor says kangaroo makes a very nice meal when it's well cooked, and we might shoot a kangaroo some day—Tor did when he was living like we mean to in our play-time."

So old Hannah faithfully promised to come often and inspect their larder, and indeed she was as good as her word, and they saw her almost every day, and she seldom came empty-handed; for she would bring with her a pitcher of fresh milk and some cakes or fruit, or perhaps a nice pasty, or a meat-pie from the kitchen; and then they would sit down in the shade and enjoy it together, and the little boys would show Hannah all that they had done, and ask her advice for the next day's work. Hannah, they soon found out, was a farmer's daughter, and had lived at home and helped on the farm till she had entered Lady Chesterton's service, many long years ago now; but she had not forgotten her old calling, and was able to tell the little

boys all that they wanted for the management of their little estate. Under her direction they railed off from the grass-land the piece they intended to cultivate, dug and dressed certain neat little squares for their intended crops, divided one plot from another by little ditches, and made a little flower-garden immediately in front of their hut, in which they planted such flowers as the gardener could spare from the planting out of his own summer-garden, which had been completed during the last fortnight, whilst they took great pains over the border, which was made of flint stones and clinkers, carefully collected from the rubbish-heaps and waste pieces round the garden, where many treasures were unearthed: and they even came upon a find of gravel lying in one of the outer yards which they were told they might take away if they liked, so they borrowed a wheelbarrow, and, with great toil but an equal amount of pleasure, carried it away to their own domain, and made a neat little gravel walk right up to their front door between the brilliant flower-beds.

Great was their pride and delight in their own handiwork, and great the pleasure, each Saturday as it came round, of bringing Granny to see what they had accomplished in the week. And because diligence even in play promotes diligence in work-hours, the little boys gave great satisfaction, for the

most part, to their instructors, being seldom idle or wilfully inattentive, though Curly's mind was apt to wander sometimes from his books to the charming hut which was a sort of centre to their lives. Their summer lessons were, however, short and easy, as it was thought well to let them be much out of doors, and Edith Dalrymple, who took most of Curly's instruction upon herself, was so bright and interesting in her method of giving lessons that the little boys really enjoyed their studies, and made as much progress as could reasonably be expected of them.

And in that house, as in their grandmother's, they learnt a great many lessons without knowing that they were lessons at all. There was the same reverence for holy things, the same kindness and care for others, the same busy usefulness that was like a pervading atmosphere at the Priory, and the children gradually imbibed the same spirit, without any teaching—or very little—in actual words; and they became anxious for some little labour of love, would gather their finest flowers to take to some sick person in the village, or save for a like purpose the finest of the fruit Hannah or Granny gave them, and began to take a friendly interest in all the humble labourers who worked upon the place, learnt their names and the names of their children, and gave away to the latter several of their

own books and toys, because, when they visited them in their homes, they found that they had nothing of the kind to amuse them on wet days.

And if they gave pleasure in their simple fashion, they certainly received many wonderful surprises themselves. One day it would be a new chicken in their little poultry-yard, which, in imitation of Phyl's, they kept wired in, letting the chickens run out into the paddock for a good many hours each day; and once, to their immense pride and delight, it was a little black pig, which appeared, together with a little styer of its own, in the corner of the paddock, just as if the fairies had brought it there. And it was such a dear little pig, too—not a bit like the coarse, ugly creatures the children saw in some yards; and they grew so fond of it, and took such pains with it, cleaning out its styer every day, and gathering fresh fern and nice straw for its bed, that it kept as sleek and clean as a dog, and if let out of its styer would follow the children about in the most ridiculous way, grunting at their heels, and getting fed on all sorts of dainties such as few pigs live to enjoy.

Of course Granny was the kind fairy who had given them this new pet, and very warmly did the little brothers thank her when they saw her next. She was very much pleased, as time went on, at the care the small farmers took of their animals

and she told them she would buy their chickens of them when they got old enough for the market, and their pig too, and that with the proceeds they could buy seeds or another pig or whatever they liked, and improve their property in a good many ways. Luckily for their own peace of mind, the children did not realise what selling their favourites actually meant; and as they knew all farmers sent their beasts to market in the end, the idea of doing the same gave them a sense of pleasurable importance. Curly looked rather blank at the idea of ever parting with their pig, but Bunny explained that it must be done when he got big, and that they would have another little one instead, who would be just as nice. Curly, not wishing to appear childish, gave his consent to the plan, the more so as the day of parting was still far off.

And so this happy and eventful summer slipped quickly away. Tor, in his own home not very far away, was making himself very useful to Granny; and when in the winter she was laid up with an attack of rheumatism, and could not get out of doors for six weeks, she was glad indeed that she had such a capable land-agent at hand. Tor almost lived at the Priory during those days, and the little brothers, to their great contentment, spent the Christmas holidays there, instead of going home, as Granny wanted them about the house to enliven

her convalescence. Tor of course spent the festive season at the Priory; and as Granny was able to leave her room by that time, though not the house, there was fine fun over the many gifts and cards, and the romps and frolics that were got up for the benefit of the little ones. It really seemed as if Granny enjoyed a frolic as much as any of them, and, as Curly remarked reflectively at the close of the evening, it was really quite funny, for Granny seemed younger than any of "the girls," although she was grandmother of them all; for none of them but Madge ever cared to romp at Christmas, and she soon got tired; but Granny seemed as if she never were tired, and could go on as long as they themselves could.

And Granny laughed, and Phyl said something they did not understand about age not going with years but with the heart, and some people never growing old. And then she went and kissed the old lady, and the children followed her example, and so did Tor, even; and she held Phyl's hand, and his too, and looked in both their faces, and said something about not leaving the "old woman alone in her old age," which made them both say "No, no," very quickly, whilst Phyl's face glowed a bright red, and Tor looked so proud and happy that the children wondered what it could all be about.

“But of course they’re happy because they make other people happy,” said Bunny, as the little brothers went off to bed hand in hand. “It has been a nice jolly Christmas this year, and all the jollier because we know that all the poor people have had a nice time too. When we’re men, Curly, we’ll never forget the poor at Christmas-time. We’ll try to be kind and good, like Granny.”

## CHAPTER XI

“CURLY, Curly! I’ve found it all out now—and I think it’s *so* nice, and really quite romantic.”

Curly was cleaning out the pigstye in readiness for the little new pig, who was coming in place of the old favourite, who had at last been taken to market, and his occupation certainly did not savour of romance; but he looked up eagerly and asked what Bunny meant, and if things *could* be romantic now that the days of chivalry were past.

“Well, I don’t quite know about that, but I *think* it’s romantic. Do you know that Tor and Phyl are going to get married, and are going to live with Granny at the Priory always, to take care of her, because she’s getting old? That’s why they have both looked so happy, and why Granny says funny things sometimes, and why Phyl is often so busy and has such a lot of new clothes. I don’t know why girls always want such a heap of new clothes when they’re married, but they always do. It’s what they call a ‘too-so,’ or something like that. I’ve heard the girls talk about it.”

“Oh yes, I know—I suppose it’s called that because at Madame Too-So’s they’re always dressed up so fine. Well, if Tor and Phyl don’t go and live somewhere else, I don’t mind if they do get married, though I don’t see what difference it will make. They can see each other as often as they like now.”

“Well, you see Tor will live partly at the Priory, partly at his own house, when they are married, instead of only staying there as a sort of visitor, as he does now. Granny couldn’t spare Phyl to be always away, you see ; and she likes Tor very much too. I think she’d like to have them living always with her, but Hannah says gentlemen like to have an independent home of their own. If Tor *did* ever live at the Priory always, I suppose he’d let his own farm. I wonder if we could take it ; or perhaps he’d let me draw up the lease. I’d only charge him for the sealing-wax.”

“I should think he’d like it very much—and, Bunny, couldn’t you do Phyl’s marriage-settlements too? You know girls always have to have those when they’re married—I think it’s part of the too-so.”

Bunny wasn’t quite sure if his legal knowledge went far enough for that, but he suggested the idea to Phyl, who thanked him very much for his kind intentions, but said she did not want any settle-

ments, as that had been provided for under her father's will. This sounded so very grand that Bunny treasured it up for a future occasion, and he impressed Curly very much by the way he discoursed with old Hannah on the subject, and wondered if her father's will could be a kind of tree, and if she would be married under it, as she had been made an heiress in her own right under it.

It was in March that the little brothers learned this wonderful secret, and the wedding was to be immediately after Easter; so that there was plenty to do in the short time that elapsed, and plenty to think about too. For although in one way it was not going to be a very grand wedding, as Phyl had no relations to come, and Granny was not strong enough for a great deal of company and excitement, yet the whole village and neighbourhood would be *en fête* for such an event as a wedding from the Priory, and the poor people were to have a holiday and enjoy a great feast.

For, besides the wedding itself, Granny was going to introduce Tor to her tenants as their future landlord and master, when she should be gone from amongst them. It was a natural choice to make, as he was the second son of her only son, the eldest of whom would inherit the family estates and his father's title; but Tor had never expected anything from his grandmother and godmother, as he had

been led to think of her as a hard woman, more or less alienated from her kindred, and it was only since he had come to know her intimately during the past year that he had arrived at a juster estimate of her character and the circumstances that had caused the cessation of intercourse between her household and that of her son.

So what was a surprise to the little brothers was a greater surprise to him, and he felt that he had indeed great cause for gratitude and happiness.

As for Bunny and Curly, there was an even greater surprise and pleasure awaiting them, for on their asking Phyl one day how many bridesmaids she was going to have, she answered, none; and on their exclaiming at that in great surprise—for Bunny doubted if the marriage would be valid without—she said she was going to strike out a new line for herself, and have for her attendants two little foot-pages in white-velvet suits slashed with crimson silk; and when the little boys exchanged wondering and inquiring glances, she further explained that they were to be the two pages, and promptly carried them off in her pretty carriage to be measured for their finery.

And when the bright morning of April came, and Phyllis Musgrave stood in all her white-robed beauty before the altar, which she would leave as Phyllis Chesterton, who so proud of her fairness, her

grace and sweetness, and of the stately, handsome presence of the bridegroom, as the two small pages, in their old-fashioned bravery, as they stood behind their future sister, one holding her flowers, the other her glove?

And in the festival which followed, the same two little pages in their conspicuous dresses were amongst the most prominent objects of interest. People seemed to think—as Curly remarked—that they had had something to do with the making of the match, and they received so many compliments and so much notice that if they had been prone to self-consciousness they might have had their heads fairly turned.

As it was, however, they were much too busy looking after the guests and running messages for one and another to have much time to think of themselves, and they were as busy and happy as possible, feeling quite like hosts themselves; for Tor and Phyl had other things to think of, and were just going away for a fortnight besides, whilst the little brothers were to stay with Granny in their absence, and help her to manage the farms till Tor could come back.

They got the last kisses from bride and bridegroom as they handed Phyllis into the carriage at the last, and stood on the terrace to watch it out of sight.



PHYLLIS AND HER PAGES.



"It's been a very nice wedding, I think," remarked Curly, straying off with Bunny into the garden now that the event of the day was over. "Didn't Phyl look pretty! And didn't Tor seem proud and happy! I think people feel very grand when they get married. Bunny, do you think we shall ever get married, you and I?"

"I don't much think so—you see we don't care for girls. If I married, I should like a nice sensible woman like Hannah, who understands about things. But she says she's too old for me—I spoke to her the other day—and she laughed too. But I don't see anything to laugh at. Old women are much nicer than girls. Just look at Granny, now."

"We can't marry Granny, you know," said Curly, reflectively; "it's written up in the church porch that we mayn't. Do you think Granny had it put up in case we should want to?"

Bunny would not commit himself to an opinion on such a point, and Curly continued his train of thought.

"Phyl was nice, though she was a girl, and there might be another one like her. Bunny, if we found a girl as nice as Phyl, do you think we could both marry her?"

"No, Curly; for if two men marry one woman, that's bigamy, and people go to prison for that."

"Dear me, what tiresome laws people do make!

For I'm sure we don't want more than one wife between us. Well, Bunny, perhaps we'll do without one at all. There isn't much room in our hut as it is, and a girl would be rather in the way."

"Yes, I think she would. But, Curly, I think we ought to go back now. The people will be wanting their carriages, and Granny may want us to be there."

So they went back to the house, and found the party considerably diminished; but there were some laughing voices still in the dining-room, and they heard somebody propose the health of the Pair of Originals, which seemed received with acclamation.

"I wonder who *they* are," remarked Curly rather contemptuously. "Now let's go and find Granny."

## CHAPTER XII

“HANNAH—”

“Yes, dearie.”

“Hannah, what are those things that people get when they have a lot of other things too?”

This lucid question was put by Curly, who was seated upon the comfortable, battered old nursery sofa at the Priory, gravely nursing one knee, and watching Hannah’s clever fingers as they stitched at a rent he had recently made in his jacket.

The good old woman raised her eyes in a puzzled fashion, just settling her horn-rimmed spectacles more firmly on her nose.

“What, honey? I don’t quite understand.”

It was no new thing for Hannah not to understand the questions propounded by her youthful charges, and Curly was quite prepared for this reply.

“It’s something people always get—” he began slowly and deliberately, when a sudden bright thought struck Hannah, and she suggested,

“Maybe it’s the measles you are thinking of,

honey. Most folks get them at some time or another in their lives."

"It can't be measles," answered Curly very decidedly, "because Granny's got them now; she's got a great many of them—I heard her say so to Phyl. Granny hasn't got the measles now, has she, Hannah dear?"

"Nay, nay; her ladyship is wonderful well considering her years. She hasn't got naught amiss with her."

"But she's got these things that I want to know what they are," said Curly with his usually involved language. "I want you to tell me about them, Hannah. They begin with an S—at least I'm almost sure they do—and they're something like the name of the old gentleman with the white moustache who dined with Granny the night before last."

"General Ponsonby, dearie?"

"Yes, I think that was it. Well, when Granny was talking about these things, she made me think about him—so I think the name was something like it—only it began with an S."

Hannah felt that the question was growing too deep for her; she shook her head and said she couldn't think. But Curly was a determined little mortal, and would not let her rest.

"But you must think, Hannah, because I want to know, and Granny says if you want to know a thing

the best thing is to find it out for yourself. Now I'll just tell you what it was she said to Phyl, and then perhaps you'll be able to guess. Phyl had brought the baby to see Granny, and Granny had it on her knee, and Phyl was looking very happy, and Granny said what a companion it would be to her when it got big, and Phyl said, 'Oh yes, indeed; but that having a little boy to train up was a great—something—'

"Responsibility?" suggested Hannah, and then Curly's face beamed all over.

"*That* was it," he cried triumphantly. "I thought we'd find it out if we had a good long talk together. "Yes, a great 'sponsibility; and Granny said of course it was—that was always the way of the world: the more things we had that were nice the more 'sponsibilities we had too. She said she had a great many big ones herself, and Phyl said of course she had, and Granny said people got more and more as they grew older, and Phyl said yes, she'd felt that herself. Now I want to know what 'sponsibilities are. Is it anything like the measles, Hannah?"

"Well, no, dearie, not very much like that," answered the old woman, smiling over her needle; "but I think you're over-young just to understand what they are."

Curly drew his small figure up with an air of offence.

"I'm not a bit too little to understand," he answered; "I understand a great many things. I'm getting quite grown up; we've got a farm of our own, and I've managed all of it since Bunny's been ill. I expect if everybody gets 'sponsibilities I'll soon have some my own self, and I should like to know what they look like when they come. Do they come by post?"

"No, dear—at least I don't think many do," answered Hannah, not quite knowing how to explain matters to this original morsel of humanity.

"Well, tell me about them anyway," cried Curly. "Do you have any yourself, Hannah?"

"Ay, dearie, that I do."

Curly's eyes opened wide with astonishment and delight.

"*Do* you? That's very interesting; I didn't know you had. I've never seen them. Do show them to me now."

"They aren't things as can easily be seen," answered the old nurse. Whereat Curly answered quickly,

"Then tell me about them—I want to understand. What is one of your 'sponsibilities?"

"Well, my lamb, you are one of them, and Master Bunny is another. When he had that bad cough of his a month ago he was rather a heavy responsibility for a bit."

This was such a very astounding answer that Curly sat for some seconds in silence, staring first at Hannah, and then at his own small person, as if he thought it must have undergone some radical change.

“Fancy *me* being a 'sponsibility!” he said in an awe-struck voice. “I should *never* have thought of that. I wonder when I turned into one. I didn't ever feel any difference. Am I one of Granny's 'sponsibilities too? Are you a 'sponsibility, Hannah? Is Granny a 'sponsibility herself? Phyl's baby is one, of course—I heard her say so; but I didn't think everybody was.”

Hannah was scarcely ready to go into the difficult question of the responsibility of each individual in the house with regard to its other members, but Curly was too intent upon his own train of thought to heed her silence very much.

A good many things had happened during the year which had followed upon the marriage of Tor and Phyl, and now the two little boys found themselves once again as permanent residents beneath their grandmother's roof; and though they were not altogether certain of their tenure there, they did not seriously think that they would be easily sent away.

As others had foreseen, if Lady Chesterton had tried to blind her eyes to it, her nephew and his

bride gradually drew more and more towards their own home; and though constant intercourse was kept up between the Priory and the manor-house, and there was not a vestige of hurt feeling on either side, the young couple did decidedly prefer their own independent home, and the old lady was left increasingly alone. She was not one upon whom solitude pressed with any heaviness. She was always busy and always full of occupation. She was too much the woman of the world to attempt to interfere with the arrangements of the young people—too sensible to hope to hold quite the same place in Phyl's heart as she had done before the girl had married. Now that there was a little son in the case, she knew well enough that she would see something less than before of her old favourite, and the knowledge of what was coming upon her might have been one motive for the new arrangement with regard to the children instituted at Christmas-time, when Bunny and Curly had been for a year and a half residing for the main part of their time beneath the roof of the Dalrymples.

Just at that juncture the curate had the offer of a living in the next county, and he and his sister made immediate arrangements for leaving. A new curate was engaged who was fully able to undertake the supervision of the little boys' studies, but as he

had no private means, and would have to lodge at one of the farm-houses, he could not possibly take the care of the children; and unless they had been taken in at the Priory once again, they must have been returned to their London home once more.

The little boys, fortunately for themselves, knew nothing of the fate which seemed to be threatening them; they were only told of the change of plan when everything had been finally decided.

It was other people who had wondered what their fate would be—other people who had been afraid that these bright and happy days of country life were drawing to a close; and Tor and Phyl had seriously discussed the possibility of giving the children a home with them, rather than letting them go back to London and “the girls,” when Lady Chesterton’s decision saved them from this difficulty.

Tor and Phyl always felt as if they had indirectly been brought together through the mediation, conscious or unconscious, of the two small boys, and they had a very warm affection for the youthful pair, and would have been loth to see them turn their backs upon the place they both loved so much.

Perhaps Granny had a softer spot in her heart for the two little grandsons than she chose to admit. Perhaps she missed the young life about the place now that Phyl was only a visitor instead of being a resident. Anyhow, when the question of the chil-

dren's immediate future had to be faced she had speedily announced her intention of taking them into her own house, to continue their education beneath Mr. Anderson, the new curate, and no one had been more delighted than the children themselves.

Happy as they had been under Miss Dalrymple's care, it was around the Priory that their heart-strings were wound. Granny was their beau ideal of all that a granny, or a person occupying her position, should be ; and old Hannah stood to them in the light of an affianced bride, the only point not quite settled being which of the pair should lead her to the altar, Curly stoutly maintaining that he thought they had better get a special act of Parliament to permit them both to marry her (since Tor said anything could be got by act of Parliament), whilst Bunny was certain that only one could really have her, and thought that perhaps it would be fairest to draw lots. It did not occur to either of them to leave the choice with the lady. Their manhood asserted itself in the sense of absolute appropriation of their kind old nurse, and certainly she appeared to be marvellously willing to let them settle the knotty question of matrimony their own way.

So to come home to the Priory for good, as they called it, and to be once more under Hannah's motherly care, was an immense source of delight to them. This happy change had been instituted at

Christmas, and now the spring was coming again—that delightful season of the year when all nature is at its most joyous state, and when there seems every promise for the future of happiness and delight. What child ever thinks of the slow approach of winter when spring is waking up the world to its new life and beauty? It seemed to both little brothers as if this summer were to be the most golden of their lives, for it had been decreed that after Easter, which fell late, there should be very few lessons to learn for some little time to come, and that the children should spend almost the whole of their time out of doors, working on their miniature farm and adding to their practical rather than to their theoretical knowledge.

One reason for this change of discipline was that Bunny had been laid up in March with a sharp attack of inflammation of the lungs. He had never been as robust as Curly, and the little brother was now the taller and stronger of the pair. The cold east winds seemed to have got hold of Bunny, with the result that he was for a while very seriously ill. The doctor who attended him had said that the mind and brain of the little fellow were too active for his body, and had recommended a cessation from book-learning, and an open-air life so soon as the weather should permit of it. Bunny had been very studious for a long time, and had picked up

learning very fast. A few months of idleness would do him no manner of harm ; and as for Curly, though he was not so advanced as his brother, he was quite forward enough for his age, and the doctor laughed when asked about him, and said the holiday would do him good. He was almost too big for his years, and, though he did not appear to have outgrown his strength, there was no harm in letting him have a rest too. So the small pair were informed, to their great delight, of the treat in store, and they were already picturing in glowing colours the wonders they were to perform this year.

A few days before, Curly had received a great surprise in the form of a small and rotund pony which was found by him calmly grazing in the paddock. He had been informed by the coachman that the diminutive animal had been bought by her ladyship in order that the little boys might learn to ride. Whereupon Curly must forthwith be lifted on to the broad back of the pony, and his riding lessons had commenced from that very day.

Bunny was still a prisoner in the house. He spent a good deal of his time either in bed or lying by the fire on the sofa. His strength was beginning to come back again, but not as fast as people would have liked to see, and he was condemned to stay in the house until the wind got into the south and some nice warm weather set in.

However, as Granny kept him well supplied with amusing story-books, and he had Curly to talk to whenever he was disposed, Bunny accepted his fate with great resignation. He had not quite got back the wish to exert himself much, and it was very nice having such a quiet resting-time without being worried by that horrid cough which had given him so much pain and trouble before.

Curly's accounts of the pony were very exciting, and it was a daily event for him to see his little brother come round in front of the window mounted on the miniature steed, who had plenty of spirit, although exceedingly good-tempered and docile with his childish rider. Curly took to saddle-exercise like a duck to water, which pleased Granny, who in her day had been a great horsewoman and took considerable interest in her grandson's education in this matter. The pony would run in harness also, and drew the varnished cart in a fashion very different from that of the more apathetic donkey. There seemed no end of the pleasures awaiting the children when once the weather should turn warm and Bunny be able to run about out of doors with his little brother.

Perhaps it was the possession of so many nice things that had set Curly thinking upon the momentous theme of responsibilities. He had often heard Granny say in some form or another that the pos-

session of this world's goods entailed these mysterious responsibilities upon their possessors, and the talk with Phyl a few days back upon the increase of her responsibilities in the possession of a small son had awakened all Curly's spasmodic curiosity upon the subject.

He now, after turning matters over in his mind, resolved to make Hannah explain the whole matter to him from beginning to end. Hannah's explanations, as he well knew, were not very lucid, any more than were his own questions to other people. Still he knew that her patience was boundless, and that if he only drove long enough at one point he generally got some enlightenment in the end—or thought he did, which came to much the same thing: so after a very long and earnest colloquy on the subject, which was illustrated by many instances of how Granny took up the responsibilities of her position, Curly felt a considerable mastery of the subject, and decided that he would enlighten Bunny thereon.

Bunny was having his afternoon nap all this time. He generally did that between four and five, and woke up again at tea-time, and came in and took that meal with his small brother. Hannah, after pouring out their first cup, and seeing them well begun, used generally to leave them to themselves and go downstairs to her own tea. After she had done so on this particular April evening, Curly, who

was steadily munching at his thick slice of bread-and-butter, at last laid it down on his plate, and, looking across at Bunny, remarked solemnly,

“Bunny, I think you and I ought to think seriously about our ’sponsibilities.”

Bunny, who himself loved a fine phrase and had done much to enlarge Curly’s vocabulary, looked eagerly across at his small brother, who continued his speech with great sedateness.

“You’ve been ill, you know, and you haven’t had time to think about things. I’ve been thinking a good deal, and I’m quite sure we’re big enough now to have ’sponsibilities of our own. People always do when they’ve got a lot of property—and we’ve got a good bit ourselves now. There’s the pony come, too. I dare say he’s a ’sponsibility himself, though I’m not quite sure.”

“I—I don’t think I quite know what responsibilities are,” said Bunny, slowly, “though I’ve often heard people talk about them.”

“Well, I didn’t know till I asked Hannah; but I think I understand better now,” said Curly, feeling not a little elated to be able to enlighten Bunny, who was generally himself the instructor. “You see, it’s like this: ’sponsibilities are funny kinds of things. I think they’re something like the Cheshire cat’s grin—sometimes they’re there and sometimes they’re not. I don’t quite know how to explain. You were

a 'sponsibility to Hannah when you were here and were ill, but you weren't one when you lived with Miss Dalrymple; and you're not one to Watkins, and I'm not one neither—though I *am* one to coachman when he is teaching me to ride, but not when he isn't. It's quite queer and complicated, you see, and I don't quite understand how things go and when they are and when they're not 'sponsibilities. They seem to appear and disappear like the Cheshire cat's grin. But Hannah says there are some 'sponsibilities which are always there—and I think it's people with land to look after who have those. And you know we have a good lot of land, so I'm sure we ought to have some 'sponsibilities too. I asked Hannah what they were, but she only laughed and said to be good was all we need trouble about now. That's what people always say to us," concluded Curly with rather an injured air; "whatever we want to do they say we can do by being good. I don't mind being pretty good mostly, but I'd like other things too. I don't think you and I are properly taking up the 'sponsibilities of our position."

Curly swelled out his small person as he brought out this last flower of speech, which he had treasured up in his memory after the overheard conversation between Granny and Phyl, and he was glad to see that it produced a marked effect upon Bunny.

"I must think about that," he said; "it wouldn't

do for us to get lazy and careless and selfish. I think, now you mention it, that when people won't take up their responsibilities they are always called one of those names."

"Yes, you think about it—you are older than me, Bunny. And I have all the farm on my hands just now, so that I don't have much time. You know very soon we shall have plenty of time for 'sponsibilities and everything else; for it will soon be Easter and my lessons will stop, and then we shall hardly have any more till the summer is gone away—and that won't be for *ages*."

Bunny was very willing to be the one to do the thinking. He had had a good long spell of inactivity for his small wits, and felt that they would be all the better for being sharpened up.

With the privileges of illness had come a certain laxity of nursery discipline as far as he was concerned. When Curly had gone off to the tutor's for lessons, or was out riding, or busy upon the "farm," as the paddock and its live-stock had gradually come to be called, Bunny was permitted, when well enough, to ramble about the warm house almost at will, often finding his way into his grandmother's private room, where she passed the greater part of the day, sometimes transacting business, sometimes reading, or writing her letters. He was never sent away when he appeared, but was accommodated

with a chair beside the fire, and when he was well enough, or had voice sufficient, he would read to her paragraphs out of the newspaper, and attempt sometimes to discuss them with her, thus gaining a good assortment of miscellaneous ideas, and getting hold of a great many fine phrases which he was able to bring out later to Curly with more or less effect.

At other times he would wander down to the pantry, where Watkins was generally to be found polishing up the large flagons or candelabra which adorned the dining-room sideboard and Lady Chesterton's dining-table, or regularly cleaning the stores of massive plate which the house boasted. He was a nice old man, and was always ready to talk, and, though by no means always good at keeping to the point, would ramble on by the hour together if he could find a listener, and delighted to make the little invalid warm and comfortable, and talk to him when nothing better offered.

So, upon the very next day after Curly had gone off to lessons, Bunny resolved, as soon as he was up, to go down to Watkins in the pantry, and have a talk about responsibilities, trying if possible to discover what were his own and Curly's; for the more he thought about the matter the more certain he was that there must be some waiting for them somewhere: only it was rather humiliating to have

to ask directly what they were. He would much rather, if he could, find it out for himself.

So Bunny resolved to go about things in a diplomatic way, and after having exchanged greetings with the old butler, and ensconced himself comfortably in the easy chair that was always put at his disposal, he looked at the quantities of shining plate displayed before his eyes, and remarked sagely,

“I should think, Watkins, that you must feel to have a great many responsibilities.”

“You may say that, sir,” was the hearty answer. “Why, every one of these ’ere spoons and forks is, in a manner of speaking, a responsibility—to say nothing of them bigger things, as might weigh down a younger man altogether. It’s a deal for any one man to have on his mind; but I’ve been too long with her ladyship to think of any change. Why—”

Watkins went on talking, but Bunny did not listen. He well knew the rambling sort of talk that would be going on—tales of how he first came to service at Ladywell Priory, stories of old days that Bunny knew by heart.

The little boy felt as though he had received a slap in the face. He had come to have a serious conversation about responsibility, and was told that it was spoons and forks! What should he hear next? Everybody told a different tale. Phyl’s was a baby; Granny’s was tenants—he had heard her say

so once, he was sure ; Hannah's seemed to be their two selves ; Watkins talked about spoons and forks.

Bunny turned all this over in his mind till a certain glimmering of the truth began to come to him ; but he could not grasp the idea in anything like its fulness, and he wished he could get it explained. Granny no doubt would tell him best if he asked, but little folks seldom go to the best fountain-head for their supplies. With all her kindness and liberality, there was always something a little formidable about Granny, and she did not encourage the children to chatter unrestrainedly before her, or to look to receive her undivided attention when they were with her, as is too much the way with children in modern days. Granny was old-fashioned in her notions of discipline, and Bunny and Curly were often reminded that children were to be seen and not heard. A few of the ordinary barriers as to rules and regulations had been broken down during Bunny's convalescence, but even with all that there was nothing like unrestrained intercourse between grandmother and grandson. Granny was generally busy, and Bunny would never have dreamed of disturbing her by putting questions out of his own head.

It was much easier to question Watkins, but the reply about the spoons and forks was a little quenching. But suddenly Bunny heard the momentous

word crop out in the midst of the story Watkins was telling, and his attention was at once riveted.

“And my lady she said, ‘It’s a responsibility we can’t ignore,’ and then they set to to think what was to be done.”

“What was the responsibility?” asked Bunny, eagerly.

“Why, having all these people—tenants and cottagers and everybody on the estate—and not a church fit for them to meet in, or a parson they would even go and hear. You see, little master, this was long years ago, when things were very different from what they are now, and master’s big property up in the north—that is sold now because your papa didn’t care to live there, so they broke the entail and got rid of it—wasn’t like this place here, which belongs to her ladyship in her own right. But when he married and came there with his wife—I mean your grandfather, Sir Ronald, you know—I came and took service with them then, and I saw all her ladyship did to get things different-like for the people.”

“What did she do?” asked Bunny; for this was a new story, or at least partially so, and he was quite interested.

“Well, the first thing was to put the church in order, and then to get something done so as to have a new clergyman, for the old was a real bad

'un, you see, and not one of the people would go near the church whilst he was there. But what her ladyship meant when she said they couldn't ignore the responsibility was about the children. They ran about like little savages, and hardly knew how to talk so as to be understood; and as for reading or writing—Lor' bless you, sir, there was scarce a grown person in the place as knew their letters. Her ladyship she never did hold with a lot of schooling for working folks, and never thought much of these Board-schools as folks talk of nowadays; but she spoke out plain and strong then. 'I should wish that every child on the estate should be able to read his Bible and write his own name—which means that if taken away from his home he might be able to send a few lines to his mother to tell her he was alive and well.' And with that she set to work herself to found a dame's school for the girls and boys, and on Sunday she had the best behaved up to the laundry and gave them some teaching herself; and bit by bit things got better-like, and all the folks said as there wasn't a lady in the kingdom as would have conquered the difficulties so quickly as her ladyship did. Ah, she's a wonderful woman, she is."

"And that was taking up her responsibilities, was it," said Bunny, gravely and thoughtfully—"teaching children not to be savage, and how to read and write?"

“Ay; and a deal of good she did in many another way too. Rich folks have a sight of responsibilities upon them—worse sometimes than my spoons and forks. But there, there; we each of us has our niche carved out for us, and we must try and fit it as best we may.”

Bunny spent a long time in the pantry that morning, talking long and earnestly with the garrulous butler; but when he went upstairs at last, it was with a feeling of considerable enlightenment; and as he sat nursing his knees on the rug beside the fire, he remarked complacently to himself,

“Well, I think I shall be able to tell Curly something now. It would be rather a nice thing to do, I think; and I believe it is a real responsibility, because I don't think anybody knows about them but us.”

## CHAPTER XIII

CURLY, on his side, had a very pleasant day, with an unexpected variation of the usual routine of his life. He went as usual to Mr. Anderson for his morning's lessons, but when these were done he found Phyl waiting for him in her pretty pony phaeton, to drive him to her house to spend the afternoon.

"It is such a long time since you were there, little viking," she said, "I told Tor I really would not have it any longer, and that I would go over and carry either one or both of you off by fair means or foul. Bunny would like to have come, but Granny said the doctor would rage if he heard of his having been taken to drive out in an open carriage; but she said that she would have him to lunch with her if I fetched you away to spend the day with me."

Curly was very content to be fetched. He liked Phyl, was devoted to Tor, and interested in the new baby, though regarding it with a certain amount of scorn, as an object utterly useless and not (in his

eyes) at all ornamental, though he heard other people speak of it as being very lovely and adorable.

“If I’d been you, Phyl,” he remarked as they drove along, “I’d have bought that baby of yours bigger. Why, Hannah says it’ll be a year before it can even stand on its hind-legs or begin to talk. I’d have got a bigger one whilst I was about it. Fancy having it a whole year wanting a nurse to carry it about! What an awful bore it must be! I think you made a mistake—I really do. You know when Granny bought us the pony she particularly said she wouldn’t have it too young, because young things were so troublesome and not half the use they were when they were older. I think you’d better have asked her advice about getting an older baby.”

Phyl’s eyes were full of fun as she answered,

“Well, perhaps it would have been better, now you mention it, you little wiseacre; but really it did not occur to me at the time.”

“Perhaps you could change him,” suggested Curly, struck by a bright idea. “I know Granny once changed a carriage-horse that didn’t suit, only she had to pay rather more, coachman said, than if she’d bought him straight down.”

Phyl laughed as she replied,

“Well, you see, I’ve got rather fond of little Tor,

and as he's been given Tor's name, I think it might be rather a pity to change him now. He will get bigger in time."

"Yes, I suppose he will. I know one does get fond of things even though they are troublesome. But perhaps if you changed him you could get a baby who wouldn't be such a 'sponsibility."

"Who told you he was one?" asked Phyl with dancing eyes.

"You told Granny your own self. You said a young baby was a 'sponsibility, or something like that. Perhaps if you changed him for a bigger one he would be less of a 'sponsibility."

"I'm afraid not, Curly; I'm afraid it goes rather the other way," answered Phyl, half grave, half laughing. "But never mind; I don't think I'd be without him, responsibility or not; and you must learn to love him too, and be good to him when he grows older, for you know you are a kind of little uncle to him, though you will be more like a big brother, I think."

Curly's eyes opened wide. He felt quite swelled out with importance at hearing that he was actually a kind of uncle. The idea had never presented itself to him before, though to be sure Hannah had said something like it to Bunny once. Curly associated the idea of uncle with grown men with whiskers and walking-sticks, like the only uncle he

ever remembered to have seen in the London house. It was a very magnificent thing to hear that he was an uncle himself.

“Oh, I’ll be awfully good to him,” he answered eagerly. “I’ll be the kind of uncle boys sometimes have in books. Don’t change him, Phyl, ’cause p’raps I shouldn’t be uncle to the bigger one.” He paused a few moments and then said reflectively, “Phyl, do you think being an uncle makes one have fresh ’sponsibilities?”

Phyl looked smilingly into the solemn face of the little boy and asked,

“What has put that notion into your head, Curly?”

He blushed. He did not care to tell Phyl that he and Bunny were on the lookout for the responsibilities of their position, and that he would have been glad of some information on the subject. Curly possessed a good deal of the inherent reticence of childhood; and though Phyl was a sort of playfellow and confidante to both little boys, she also ranked as a grown-up person who understood all those obscure remarks and allusions which often set them in a maze. As the child did not reply, Phyl went on speaking herself.

“I don’t think your responsibilities towards little Tor will be very serious yet awhile. When he grows older, if you are still here you will have to

be careful about leading him into mischief. If he takes after his father and mother, I'm afraid he will get into plenty on his own account without any prompting."

Curly did not feel that he had gained any particular information upon his point, but the carriage was quickly approaching the old manor-house, and there was Tor on the lawn, playing with the big mastiff dog, and watching for Phyl's return.

"Holloa, Curly! so you have turned up, have you? How do, old man? What, are you going to drive round to the stables? Bravo, old chap! You are getting on with your accomplishments. That's right; hold him well in hand: he has a trick of trying to take that corner too fine in his hurry to get to his stable. He'll make a man one of these days," added Tor to his wife, as Curly disappeared round the corner. "What a lot of good it is doing those children for Granny to have taken them in hand!"

"Indeed yes; and I don't think she would like to be without them now. She does not exactly say so, but I think she finds Bunny very good company. Evidently she sees a good deal of him now that he is boxed up in the house. I think his society affords her a considerable amount of amusement."

Curly always enjoyed a visit to Tor's house. Everything there was very nice, and Phyl kept her pretty house beautifully; but there was an air of

freedom and unrestraint about it quite different from anything to be found at the Priory. The little boy felt free to slide down the tempting balustrade of the staircase, to shout aloud for Phyl or Tor all over the house, to run about after them where and as he would, and to make himself generally at home both in- and out-doors.

There was a nice old-fashioned garden round the house, which in time would be exceedingly pretty. A great deal had been already accomplished, and Phyl had transplanted numbers of her pet plants from the Priory garden here, and a little later on in the year there would be a blaze of bloom in the long borders that ran under the windows and by the laurel hedge. As it was, the bulbs were fast coming into bloom. The crocuses were past their glory, and daffodils of all kinds were rearing their heads and nodding gaily in the sunshine. Curly was fond of flowers, and was beginning to be rather knowing about their names and habits. His own garden, which certainly did him credit, seeing that he had had to dispense with any assistance from Bunny latterly, was almost as bright as Phyl's, he confided to her.

"Only, of course, it isn't so big, because I have other things to grow too, and one can't do everything at once."

"And how are the chickens? and is the pig

well? I have not been round the farm for a long time."

"No—you have been so lazy all the winter, Phyl. But you must come soon. We've got two pigs now. The first we had was fatted when he was big enough, and then Granny had him, and she gave us a lot of money for him, and we bought two little ones, and the rest of the money we spent in barley, meal, and corn for the chickens. Bunny said it wasn't fair to expect Granny to give us everything, and so when we had two pigs instead of one we bought them some food ourselves. We keep it in the hut, because Bunny can't live there, we find, and Granny has let the carpenter make it into a sort of storehouse for our things. It's much warmer really than it was when we lived in it, and if ever we do want to squat there again it will be a capital house for us. But Granny seems to like us to live with her now, and we don't mind." Curly spoke with a condescending grace that sent Tor off into a fit of laughter. "Of course it would be more amusing if Granny and Hannah would come and live with us in the hut; but as they don't care to do that, the next best is for us to live with them. I don't think it does for a big house like that not to have a man in it. Of course there is Watkins; but he's so old, and he isn't very brave. He runs away when we get the old pistols off the table in

the big hall and rush at him as if we were brigands. He runs away and hides in his pantry. Of course if anybody really *did* come to attack the house, that sort of thing wouldn't do at all. Watkins would be no good, and I don't think the footman would be either. I expect everything would fall on Bunny and me. *We* shouldn't run away."

"No, you would feel the responsibilities of your position too much," said Tor, with a grave face and dancing eyes; "the whole household would depend upon you in such an emergency as a midnight attack of robbers."

Curly looked up quickly with an eager light in his eyes, but the bell was already ringing for the mid-day meal, and he went into the dining-room in the wake of his host and hostess.

That afternoon he spent mostly with Tor, going round the farm-places, looking at the stock, and asking innumerable questions about various things which struck him. He thought Tor was a very good farmer (as indeed he was), and secretly hoped that when he and Bunny were grown up, Granny would give them a farm, as she had given Tor one, and let them help her to look after her property as well. About three o'clock, when Tor had to go off in another direction to visit some fields that were being sown down, Curly begged to be allowed to accompany him, and to his great delight was

mounted on a small pony and permitted to trot along beside Tor's tall horse.

Tor had only once seen the little fellow on horseback, and that was almost the first time he had been mounted. He was very well satisfied with his progress since that day, and gave him several hints that Curly listened to eagerly. He thought Tor's way of holding the rein very superior to that taught by coachman; and though Tor was very quick to note anything amiss, and pulled the little boy up very soon if he got careless or slovenly, Curly felt it a great advance to be riding beside his tall companion along the open roads, and came home at tea-time very thirsty, but exceedingly elated by all he had seen and done.

Phyl was in the conservatory that Granny had built out beyond the drawing-room, and which Phyl used almost like a second drawing-room, for it was too big for her to keep full of flowers from her little range of pits in the kitchen-garden, so that half of it was covered with rugs and furnished with comfortable wicker chairs, and on bright afternoons Phyl would always have tea out here, and the baby was often to be found lying contentedly at her feet in a little wicker cradle, as Curly found him to-day.

He squatted down on the rug beside the baby, and looked at the small fat hands that were aimlessly trying to clutch at his bright hair as it

glistened in the sunlight. Curly's hair had never grown long again since the night of the fire, nearly two years ago, though it was not kept quite as short as the young gentleman himself would have preferred, but was allowed to wave round his head in a floating crop of tangled curls, so that he looked like a veritable little cherub, though Phyl still stuck to her original name of the "little viking."

"I think he's a nice baby, Phyl," said Curly, meditatively, "but I should admire him more if he would not be always screwing up his face like that."

"Well, it might be more becoming if he did not," admitted the mother; "but it's a way babies have at that age, I believe."

"They are always hideous little monsters," concluded Tor, as he came in and lifted the child high in his arms, whilst it crowed aloud in delight.

"If you think it's a hideous little monster, I wonder you cared to buy it," remarked Curly, setting himself to the serious business of tea, and looking at Tor over the edge of his cup with an air of surprise.

"Well, perhaps it was rather a mistake," answered Tor, setting down the child on Phyl's lap and taking his own cup, "but I have a kind of foolish weakness for the little beggar, now he has come. Don't you think he's shamefully backward, Curly? Why, I expected he'd be walking and talking by this time."

"Well, then, I don't think you know much about

that kind of animal," said Curly; "I know a great deal more than you do. He won't walk till he's about a year old, and then he'll begin to try and talk if he's pretty forward; but some of them don't speak a bit plain till they get to be pretty nearly two. I think myself it's a mistake to get them so young. I should have bought one bigger to start with."

"Well, when you get to be a man, you might set up a baby-farm of your own, and keep the neighbourhood supplied to order," answered Tor; "I don't think there is such a thing just round here, or we might have done better. But since you know so much about the species, you might make it a very profitable concern. When you do, we'll think about giving you our custom, eh, Phyl?"

But Phyl only said, "Silly boy!" and then Tor laughed; but Curly sat still drinking his tea and turning the new idea over in his mind. He didn't think it at all a silly one; it might be a very "good speculation" some day, as people said of other kinds of farms. He had certainly never seen a baby-farm yet, but then he was aware by this time that there were a considerable number of things that he had never seen in his small life. It certainly did not follow that he never would: and Hannah, if either he or Bunny married her, would be a capital person to help them to look after it, for she knew a great

deal about babies—she had told him all he knew, and Tor had said that was a great deal—and she would certainly be a great help. If babies were profitable, it might be a very good branch to open. He looked up at Phyl by-and-by to ask,

“Do babies cost much?”

The talk between husband and wife had meantime drifted to other channels, so that nobody saw the drift of the child's question. Tor laughed as he answered,

“I should think they did! the most expensive little beggars out. There's no end to what they cost one, eh, Phyl?”

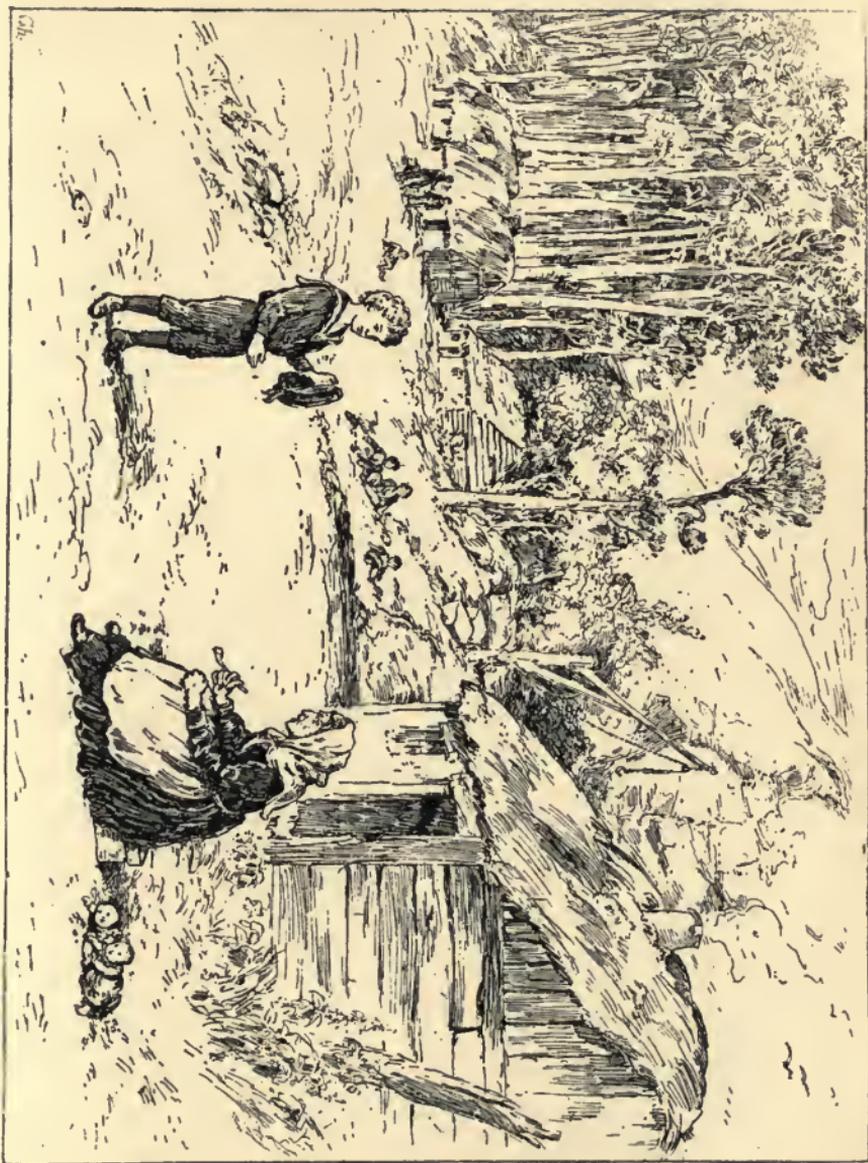
Curly went back into his brown study. If he and Bunny could buy up babies cheap and sell them to people who had to give a great deal for them, it might be a very lucrative branch of the business. He did not think it was at all a bad idea of Tor's, and rather wondered why he didn't adopt it himself; but perhaps he had enough to do as it was, and he had Granny's work to do, often, as well as his own.

Time was, however, getting on, and Curly got up to go. The walk home was nothing for his sturdy little limbs—only two miles across country by an unfrequented path he and Bunny had discovered for themselves. By the road it was three miles, and by the ordinary foot-path two and a half; but the

little brothers had recently discovered a new and delightful way of their own which was shorter than any of the others, though to be sure it was rather rough walking.

This was, however, no drawback to them. They were light and active, and too small to be incommoded by the overhanging boughs of the trees, which would have caught the heads or hats of older persons. A wood is always enchanting to small children, and this wood was particularly attractive, for in the midst of a large clearing there was an old, deserted stone-quarry, where were several tumble-down huts in which, in old times, the quarrymen had lived, and beside the huts a dilapidated crane and other fascinating things, whilst the ground was all sparkling and shiny with fragments of quartz and spar which had at some time or another been quarried out of the rocks.

A stream ran trickling through the wood, and at the foot of the quarry had formed a deep dark pool, from the other side of which it escaped in a shining and bubbling little cascade. Altogether it was a very captivating spot, and the little boys had spent a great deal of time here during the past summer. Curly had begun to pay occasional visits to it already, now that the spring was coming again, and the first time he had gone there he had had a great surprise.





Actually the old huts had been patched up in a very rough way, and some people were living in them. At first the little boy was rather vexed, for he had hoped that nobody in the world knew about the place except himself and his brother. But he was too much interested to go away without finding out what it all meant, and he had gone up to the nearest one and made inquiries. At first he had been rather surprised by the reception he met. There was a queer-looking old woman inside who bid him begone in a fierce voice, and then a lot of dirty children had come swarming about him, and other younger women had appeared, staring at him through their matted locks, until a timid child would have been fairly frightened. But Curly was not timid, and he only thought he had come across a settlement of bush-rangers or wild Indians, or something of that sort—just as he and Bunny had always longed to do. If only they would not insist on scalping him and eating him without understanding that he was their friend, he felt sure all would go well; and accordingly he had been very polite, had told the old woman that he was very pleased to make her acquaintance, and had asked very courteously if he could do anything to help them.

Something in his speech and manner had very quickly disarmed hostility, and Curly had been

invited into the stuffy little hut and enlightened as to the meaning of this odd incursion.

It seemed that these people were part of a gang of travelling tinkers or vagrants, commonly called gipsies, though frequently they have little connection with the real gipsy folk. In the winter they took refuge in some town, living as best they might in very miserable fashion; but with the first of the warm weather starting forth with their caravan, to seek for work along the roads, sometimes begging, only too often stealing (though this they did not tell to Curly), and making in the busy times of the year a fairly good thing out of it by engaging themselves to farmers who were short of hands at hay and harvest.

This year the caravan had started rather earlier than usual, the season being forward and winter quarters particularly uncomfortable. But it was too early for there to be much work for loafers, and nights were cold for sleeping out, whilst only the women and children could find accommodation inside the caravan. This being so, when the party had reached this deserted spot with its row of huts, it had been decided that the able-bodied men and boys should take the van and move about, trying to get tinkering and other kinds of work to do in the neighbourhood, whilst the women and children should remain in the huts, supplied with the neces-

saries of life by their comrades, who would not be very far away, until the weather became sufficiently warm to proceed as usual.

It took Curly a long time to understand the talk of these queer people, and he did not fully understand their position now; still he knew enough to bring home to Bunny a tolerably connected tale, and since that time the "gipsies" had been a favourite theme with the little brothers, and Bunny much hoped soon to make their personal acquaintance.

Curly had been once or twice since his first encounter, and now considered himself quite a friend of the old woman, who appeared to be the grandmother of the whole colony. He took her little presents when he went—a screw of 'baccy (though at first he had been rather scandalised to find that she smoked, and had told her that he didn't at all think *his* Granny did), or a meat pie, or a woollen comforter, such as Bunny had learned to knit whilst he had been confined to the house. So the little boy in the blue sailor suit with the crop of golden curls was a welcome visitor at the huts. The children swarmed out to see him, the babies crowed and laughed when he snapped his fingers at them, and the old woman told him he was as welcome as flowers in May, and bid him sit down in her stuffy little hut to have a chat with her whenever he appeared.

He was not going to pass his friends by this evening, although he had not much time to spare. It was a beautifully warm evening, and even the old woman was outside the hut, smoking her pipe at the door. The children were sprawling about in picturesque confusion; and as Curly cast his eyes upon a pair of swarthy little twins some six months old, entwined in an indiscriminate embrace, a sudden flash of inspiration came across him, and he stopped quite still for a moment, saying to himself,

“Why, I declare we could begin *now*. That’s an awfully nice pair of babies, and old granny here said, last time I talked to her, that they had more babies than they knew what to do with, and she wished they could get rid of a few. I believe they’d *give* us some if we asked, and then we could begin directly. I declare I’ll speak to old granny about it this very night.”

Baring his sunny curls—as the little boy always did when he spoke to a woman, of whatever rank—he stepped forward into the circle around the huts.

“Good-evening, old granny,” he said cheerily—he had explained to her upon a previous occasion that he was obliged to address her after this fashion, as by “Granny” he meant quite another person, and if ever they were to be in the same company it might make confusion—“I hope you are very well to-night. I’m sorry I’ve not got anything for you, but I

haven't come from home. I've been out on a visit since morning."

Old granny blessed his little heart and said he was welcome whenever he came, and Curly thanked her very much.

"I haven't much time to stop to-night," continued the child, "because it's past tea-time, and they will be wondering why I don't come. But I thought I'd just like to see how you were getting on. You've got a great many babies all about here," he added, plunging suddenly into his subject with considerable eagerness. "Will you take them all away with you when you have to move into the caravan?"

"I suppose there's no other way," answered the old woman in a discontented voice. "I always do say as the babbies didn't ought to be brought along, but there's no way out of it. The noise we have of a night sometimes is awful. I'd be glad enough to be rid of half of them, that I would."

"Why don't you sell them?" asked Curly with interest.

The old woman made a chuckling noise which was equivalent to a laugh.

"Nobody wouldn't buy them, little master."

"Oh, but indeed people do buy them sometimes," answered Curly, eagerly. "I know two people who bought one quite a little while ago. It's a very

nice baby, but I don't think it's so pretty as those two, they have such bright eyes and funny faces."

The old woman stroked her chin reflectively.

"Well, I have heerd tell once in a way that a babby is took like that. Folks as wants one to bring up is willing to give some'at to the parents for giving of it up, but such chances don't come in the way of the likes of us. Why, some of them women would be thankful to be rid of a brat or two to a decent home;—but there, there, nobody as ever adopts a stray child picks it out of a tinker's van. They know better than that—so they do."

Curly listened eagerly. It was not very easy to understand the old woman, she spoke with such an odd guttural intonation; but he was growing used to her, and could understand most of what she said. His eyes brightened slowly.

"Do you mean you would *give* anybody a nice baby or two who would be kind to them and take care of them?"

"I reckon as many of them mothers would be glad enough to do it; but there ain't no chance of that for the likes of they."

Curly would have liked to offer to take half-a-dozen on the spot; but he remembered that of course he must consult Bunny first, and then it would be only fair that Bunny should help in the selection of this new kind of stock. They had both

been there to choose the little pigs, and it would not be right that he should not choose the babies too. But the little boy's eyes were very bright as he stood before old granny, twisting his cap in his hands and smiling with an inward delight.

"What do babies like to eat?" he asked suddenly, rather to the old woman's astonishment, "and where do they sleep at night?"

"Oh, they just crawls into the huts and cuddles up together like little pigs and sleeps all night," answered the old woman rather scornfully; "we haven't no time cockering them up. They eats what they can get. Milk's their right food, but nothing comes much amiss to our babbies."

This was delightful; for Curly had suddenly had a vision of how Phyl's baby was washed and put to bed in a beautiful cradle. Of course he and Bunny would have nothing like that on their farm, and a sudden misgiving had seized him. Now, however, his brow cleared and he felt that all was well. The old woman was muttering to herself,

"There be babbies and babbies for sure—like as there are rich folk and poor folks all the world over. There be babbies as want a nurse apiece to do for them; but ours ain't like that: they pretty well do for themselves from the time they can walk alone. It ain't much better off than pigs they be—herded together in a sty."

This was exceedingly encouraging, and Curly's face fairly beamed as he turned to resume his interrupted journey.

"Why, it couldn't be better!" he cried to himself. "Babies to be had for nothing—who only want to live in a nice little sty, and have milk and perhaps a little barley-meal to eat. And Tor says they are awfully expensive to buy. I declare! Bunny and I will make our fortunes before Tor does himself."

And Curly on his return home dashed up to the nursery to Bunny, crying eagerly,

"Oh, Bunny, listen! I've found out a way to do it. We can have as many 'sponsibilities as we want for our farm, and make our fortune out of them too."

## CHAPTER XIV

BUNNY didn't quite see it. Indeed he was rather disappointing to his ardent younger brother.

"I don't believe people ever do keep babies to sell. I never heard of a baby-farm in my life."

"I'm sure I have," answered Curly; "I don't quite know when, but I know I have. Old granny said some folks bought babies."

Bunny knitted his brows and remained lost in thought, whilst Curly continued to urge upon him that since people did get babies they must buy them somewhere, and that Tor had said they were very expensive articles, and therefore must be very profitable to people who could get them for the asking, and then fat them and sell them to desiring purchasers.

"It doesn't sound quite right, somehow," said Bunny. "It sounds like slaves—and selling slaves is wicked. I don't think people are meant to buy and sell other people."

"Babies aren't people," answered Curly, promptly

and rather indignantly. "Why, they're sillier than animals."

"They grow up into people all the same," answered Bunny. "You wouldn't have liked it if you'd been sold when you were a baby."

"I should if Granny had bought me," answered Curly, stoutly, "and I dare say she'll buy our babies if we get them. She buys our eggs, and she bought our pig too."

"That's different."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know if I can explain—but it is. But never mind, Curly, we'll think about the babies by-and-by. I've got another plan in my head—and it's a plan about our gipsy people too."

"How funny! When did you think of it, Bunny?"

"This very day, when you were out."

"Well, that's rather funny—both of us to have a plan about our gipsies. Tell me what yours is, Bunny. But I think I shall like mine best. Is yours profitable?"

"Well, no, I don't think it is." And then, as Curly's face fell somewhat, he added quickly, "Unless it got on very well by-and-by, and we had school-fees."

Curly's eyes opened wide.

"School-fees, Bunny? What *are* they?"

“Why, don't you know?—the pence the children pay for being taught in school.”

“But we shouldn't get them,” said Curly, perplexed.

“We might, perhaps, if we opened a school of our own.”

This was a very astonishing idea to Curly, but it was quite interesting to think of anything so grand as a school of their own. Curly sat up in bed nursing his knees, and staring hard at Bunny.

“What do you mean, Bunny? Tell me some more. How could we have a school?”

“Well, you see it's something like this, Curly: I've been talking to Watkins and to Hannah and to Granny about responsibilities, and I think I begin to understand what they are.”

“They're babies for one thing,” breathed Curly, softly; but Bunny, intent on his own thought, went on speaking:

“You see, it's something like this: everybody has them different, and often they change about, and that makes it very confusing. But if people know of other people who don't know anything, and are like savages and heathens, and nobody isn't doing anything to teach them or make them better, then they are responsibilities, and the people who know about them ought to try and teach them themselves—or have a Dame to do it for them if

they are rich enough. Granny had a Dame for hers when she found them all growing up without knowing anything. But of course we couldn't manage that, because a Dame has to be paid, and Watkins doesn't think there are any Dames left—not any that have schools, at any rate. But I don't see why we shouldn't keep school ourselves, for there isn't anybody who knows about the gipsies or cares for them except us—and so they are our responsibilities, don't you see?"

Curly drew his breath hard. He was not sure that he did see; but he liked the idea of taking the gipsy children under their own care, and felt that it might lead to the adoption of his own pet scheme.

"Do you think you *could* teach, Bunny?"

"Yes, I'm almost sure I could; and so could you too, Curly. You can ask the people there if the children know anything: but I don't expect they do, and everybody ought to know how to read their Bibles, and to write a few lines home to their mothers if they went away. Granny said that her own self—and Granny always knows."

"Of course she does," assented Curly, heartily. "Well, I should think we could teach the children to read. We can both read ourselves, and you can write beautifully, Bunny. You might teach them about useful things like leases and marriage-settle-

ments—because of course they *might* want to get settled down some day, though old granny says they always wander about most of the year now. I will ask her if they would like a school for the children. If they would, we could begin it directly you can go out, Bunny.”

“Yes, and I can be getting things ready beforehand,” answered Bunny, eagerly. “I shall print alphabets upon pieces of card-board, so that every scholar can have one, and I might do a few easy texts too, because you know we must try and teach them out of the Bible if they don’t know about it themselves. I have lots of time, and Granny is very kind and lets me have almost anything I ask for. I can print very well—better than I can write. I shall ask for some card-board and red ink. Some of the letters shall be red and some black—it will make it more amusing for them.”

Bunny’s dreams that night were all of educational schemes, whilst Curly’s were a jumble of babies, copy-books, and Dames with big birch-rods. Both small brothers awoke full of their new scheme of taking upon their small shoulders the responsibilities of educating the wild gipsy children, as they believed them to be; and the whole of their spare time was taken up in preparations for the commencement of the undertaking.

The wind had veered round in the night to the

southwest, and had brought in the first instance torrents of warm rain which were very welcome to the farmers, whose land had been parched up by the persistent north and easterly breezes. Even Curly did not grumble at being kept at home, for the doctor had said that Bunny might go out as soon as the wind got round to that warm quarter, and there was every prospect now of a spell of genial weather when once the rain should have done its work.

The whole household was aware that the little brothers had some new scheme afoot, so eager and absorbed were they in their comfortable nursery over squares of card-board and mysterious bottles of coloured ink. However, as the occupation seemed of a perfectly harmless and rather edifying character, nobody interfered or asked questions, and in Curly's subdued air of importance and Bunny's preternatural gravity those who knew the children best read the fact of some great new project, which doubtless in due time would be revealed.

Curly watched the weather rather impatiently during this wet week, for he wanted to go to the old quarry and consult old granny about this new project. However, it was a great consolation that between showers, when the sun shone out warm and bright, though often not for long together, Granny would send a message that the children might take a walk up and down the wide south terrace in front

of the house, and this was looked upon as a great privilege.

Bunny got stronger every day, and was soon able to race Curly from end to end, only taking a little start, as Curly's legs were almost longer than his own, and the younger boy was decidedly the stronger of the pair. Granny would sometimes come to the window and watch them, and sometimes she would walk out and join them for a little while. On one or two brighter afternoons she drove both the children out in the carriage, and Bunny began to look quite his old self again. The doctor ceased to pay him even occasional visits, and he was allowed by degrees to resume his usual habits.

By this time Easter had come and gone, and, as Bunny remarked, it was quite time to think of beginning the midsummer term. Curly had been hindered for a good many days from visiting his friends at the quarry; but shortly after Easter he got leave to ride across with a message to Phyl from Granny, and on the return journey he did not fail to pay a visit to his new friends.

The place looked rather better than before. During the rainy spell some of the men had come back, and had patched up the huts and made them weather-tight, and old granny told Curly that she thought some of the women and children would stay there the best part of the summer if they weren't inter-

ferred with by the local authorities (whatever that might mean); for her part, the old woman said, she would be glad enough to bide anywhere where there was a blue sky above them and freedom to come and go at will without all the discomforts of the caravan; and Curly brightened up very much at hearing this, and broached to his old friend the plan he and Bunny had so carefully concocted.

Old granny did not take the idea of the school quite as seriously as Curly would have liked to see her. She seemed rather disposed to laugh at the notion of the little gentlemen "troubling themselves over the likes of we," as she put it; but Curly explained that Bunny had discovered that the untaught children were their 'sponsibilities, and that it was quite needful that something should be done to mend matters. It was encouraging (from Curly's standpoint) to find that the shock-headed children who were so plentiful in the colony were almost entirely untaught. Their roving life made it easy for the parents to escape any kind of oversight or legislation. If a school-board inspector made an effort to capture a few reluctant children whilst the parents were located in a town for the winter months, and oblige them to attend the school for a time, there was speedy escape when the summer roving began, and both boys and girls appeared to have a singular faculty for

forgetting what had been crammed into their heads during the short space of a few months. Sometimes no notice was taken of the tinker folks, and the children played all the winter in the gutters, only adding to their vocabulary of slang and bad language. More occasionally some hard-working and devout clergyman would stumble across these poor degraded creatures and strive hard, for the time they remained in his parish, to bring them to some sort of knowledge of the central truths of Christianity; but for the most part they were left very much to themselves, and it was plain to Curly that their prospective pupils would not be at all beyond them in the matter of attainments, though whether they might not be too much for their instructors in another sense was quite a different matter.

Apparently hitherto the very thought of schooling had been odious to the young of the community, and Curly, after listening to old granny's account of the way in which the boys had outwitted and escaped from the school-inspector again and again, looked a little dismayed.

"P'raps they won't come to our school," he suggested. "I don't think we'd thought of that."

"Oh, bless your little heart, they'll come fast enough to you. Why, they likes a bit of novelty, and 'twon't be like as if it will be real schooling.

It will be just a bit of fun for them, and maybe it will do them good—if it don't do you no harm."

Curly looked rather scandalised at this light way of treating so serious a matter.

"It will be a real school," he answered with dignity. "We shall be quite strict. Our Granny is a very strict woman, and we mean to have rules like hers. You mustn't make them think it is to be fun. We shall teach them just what they do in schools—Dame's schools, you know. They are to read their Bibles and write a little. Everybody ought to be able to do that, Granny says."

A softer look came over the old woman's face.

"Ay, little master, 'twould be a good thing if some on us could read the Bible now and then. When I was young I had a good mother. I used to read it to her myself: but I scarce ever think of those days now. It's a hard life, is ours. We don't seem to have no time for anything like that."

"Bunny would read to you sometimes, I'm sure, if you liked," said Curly, who thought the old woman looked sorrowful. "He reads very well—better than I do. But I could teach the children. We have got a lot of alphabet-cards printed for them."

"Bless your little heart, you'll soon be tired of it; but it does one good to hear folks talking as if they cared for the likes of we. Come as often as

you will, little master, and if the little varmints are obstropèrous, you call old granny, and I'll come out and take the stick to them."

Curly, however, thought they would be able to dispense with such strong measures, and went out to make a selection of scholars. By this time he was a well-known and popular person in the little colony; and though he found on the whole that old granny was the most satisfactory person to talk to, he had a nodding acquaintance with almost everybody there, and knew the names or nicknames of more than half the children.

He had no difficulty in getting eager assents from as many as he asked to join the anticipated school. One or two bigger boys made mouths and looked as if they could be pretty troublesome if the fancy took them; but they were amused with the idea of being taught out here in the old quarry, and Curly found what seemed to be a very desirable school-room in a hollowed-out place something like a cave, which contained a number of scattered blocks of stone of various sizes that would do for seats for the scholars. The bigger boys promised to arrange these blocks into something like regular rows, and the wall of the cavern would make a capital black-board—"only that it was white," as he afterwards explained to Bunny. But figures could be drawn on it with charcoal, which would show up well, and

Curly felt that the dignity of playing schoolmaster would be very delightful. Of course Bunny must be the head-master; but he would make an energetic assistant, and he had the advantage of knowing the pupils beforehand, and would be able to call them to order with a great show of authority.

“We shall begin on Monday,” he remarked, “at least if it is fine. I hope you will have everything ready, and be very good and attentive. Perhaps if you are all very good some of you shall have a prize by-and-by; but I can’t be quite sure of that, because we mayn’t have enough money. Perhaps Granny will give us some when she knows of our school; but it’s a secret now, because Bunny says it’s better not to trouble other people with our own ’sponsibilities—we ought to do them ourselves. Granny never talks to us about hers, so we sha’n’t tell her about ours.”

The dark-skinned children stared at him in their wild, uncouth way, but made no remark. They all admired the bright-haired little boy, who had once brought them a packet of sugar-candy to be divided amongst them. They did not exactly know what he meant to do when he came to keep school there; but life was not so very exciting to them just now but that any variety was more or less welcome.

“We’ll all come,” said the tallest of the girls, who had a bright, intelligent face despite her tattered

clothing and general air of neglect. "I did once larn my letters, and could read words that were short and easy-like, but I've mostly forgot them all now."

"You'll soon remember when you come to our school," answered Curly with conscious pride. "I'm glad you have learnt a little before; it will make it come easier. You're quite big enough to know how to read and write—it seems a pity you can't."

"That's what Pat is always sayin'—'Sure and you moight learn aisy if you would but try.' It would be glad as he'd be if I could read a bit to him of a winter noight. He's rarely fond of the words of the Howly Book, as he calls it, is Pat."

The girl spoke with an odd mixture of Irish and cockney and rustic accent. Her bright eyes glowed and sparkled, and Curly lingered for a little conversation with her. He was the more interested in her because she was the eldest of the brown-skinned family of which the twins were the youngest members. The mother, as Curly had a shrewd suspicion, was something of a virago, though she had not exhibited herself in that light before him, and at least this girl was interesting in herself.

"Who is Pat?" he asked.

"Sure he's me big brother—leastways he's me half-brother. His mother is dead, and mine isn't; but we've got the same father, if you understand,

little master." Curly nodded, though he was not quite sure if he grasped the actual relationship. "He's a good lad, is Pat; but mother she don't like him anigh her, and so he goes off with the men. Faith, thin, but granny she says as he won't be with us long. He's got the look that some of them gets before they die, and he says himself that the howly saints will take him away before long. He'll be proud and glad, that he will, if I can read to him out of the Blessed Book, for sorra a word can he read for himself."

Curly looked very serious.

"Is Pat a Roman Catholic?" he asked. "I thought Roman Catholics were not allowed to read the Bible for themselves."

"Sure, thin, I don't rightly know how that may be, nor yet what Pat is; but he's a good lad, and last winter he was that ill they took him to the Infirmary, and there was a good man there called Chaplain who came to see Pat ivery day, and talked to him and made him very happy. I don't know nothing about what folks means by their long words. But Pat's a good lad, and I doubt the howly saints will take him if he dies—though I don't know nothing about them."

Curly rubbed his hand through his hair reflectively and wondered what to say. He thought in the end that he would let matters be for the

present. Bunny was older. Bunny would be able to explain better. Curly's theology was in a rather chaotic state, and he hardly knew how to tackle such obviously great ignorance. He had a strong idea of his own that if anybody were to die, it would be Jesus into whose keeping that soul would pass, not into the hands of any saints, however holy; but he did not feel able to enter upon any discussion of the point, and turned the subject by asking,

"Where is Pat now?"

"Along of the men; but there's no telling when he may be back. If he falls ill, they will likely send him to mother to be took care of; that's what makes her so mad—she don't like taking care of Pat."

"I don't think your mother is a very nice woman," said Curly with characteristic frankness.

"They call her 'the Tartar'—all our folks do; but I ain't much afeard on her—not much. She don't often beat me; I'm too strong for her and too quick. The babbies gets it worst, 'cause when she's in a rage they can't get out of her way."

Curly looked much scandalised.

"Does she beat those little brown babies?—doesn't she care for them, then?"

"She don't like the trouble of them—sure but a pair of babbies do make a power of trouble; and when she gets mad she whacks them, and they

yell till granny comes and stops her. She beat me too when I was little, but I can run away mostly when she's in one of her big rages."

Curly was rather horrified, though it strengthened his certainty about the desirability of taking possession of the coveted brown babies. Granny and this bright-eyed girl had both said the same on the subject. But he felt that he must not commit himself yet to an open offer.

"What is your name?" he asked next.

"They call me Mops, but my real name is Molly—Molly Mavourneen, Pat calls me, and father too, sometimes, when he's in a kind mood. But often he's in liquor and only curses and swears. Pat never swears now: he says it's wicked. *Is it wicked, little master?*"

"Why, yes," answered Curly, slowly, "of course it is. Everybody knows that. There's a commandment about it, you know. It's taking God's name in vain."

"Who is God?" asked Molly, briskly.

Curly made no answer; he was quite too much taken aback at the question. Indeed he was a good deal sobered by the glimpses he had got during these few minutes' talk with Molly of a state of ignorance, misery, and degradation of which he had had no idea before. Like most intelligent children, he was very sensitive to im-

pressions, and could apprehend a great deal he could not analyse or talk about. He began to feel a curious sensation of heaviness about his heart. He wanted to get out of this place—to tell Bunny (it would be hopeless to try and speak to any other person of his thoughts) about it all. It suddenly seemed to Curly as if this school they were about to commence would be something a good deal more serious than he had fancied at first. If these children didn't know who God was, ought not that to be explained to them first of all? And would Bunny be able to make them understand?

Bunny was very much interested by all that Curly told him when he joined his brother at the tea-table. Both little brothers agreed that it was very dreadful for children to grow up so ignorant, and, as Bunny remarked, it certainly added to their responsibilities in teaching them. They certainly must be made to understand the difference between good and evil, and be taught who God was, though Curly remarked with a sigh that he didn't know how to explain that sort of thing, and wished they had some grown-up person to help them—a very unusual wish for the independent Curly.

“We'll try first by ourselves, Curly,” answered Bunny, “and if we can't manage, we'll tell Granny

and ask her to help us. But you know she likes us always to try to do anything alone first; and I think we might manage to have quite a nice little school of our own. You know I think two of us ought to do better than one Dame. Watkins told me that he went to a Dame's school once when he was a very little boy, but he never learnt anything. They used to tie her to her chair, when she wasn't minding, and often she used to go to sleep, and they would all creep out of the room one by one and go and play in the fields. If they asked her anything she didn't know (and she didn't know much), she would take the stick to them. I think we could keep a better school than that."

Curly thought so too, and took courage. The momentary sense of helplessness and depression quickly passed, and he was as ardent as Bunny in plans and projects for the mental and spiritual enlightenment of the gipsy children. If earnestness of purpose and honest good-will could make successful such an undertaking, Bunny and Curly's scheme promised well. It was the first thing they had taken up that was not to be done for personal amusement and advantage, and they felt already that there was something more satisfactory in working and thinking for others than only for self.

"We shall be able to go on Monday, I'm

almost sure," said Curly on the Saturday evening, looking out upon the sunny world with a smile of satisfaction. "Hodges says that the rooks have told him that we shall have a fine warm spell now—and the rooks always know, he says; and they told him quite right before the long frost came in the winter, because he told us so before the frost came. Rooks must be very clever birds, I think; but it's quite as clever of Hodges to understand them. I can only hear them say 'Caw, caw,' as they fly about; but Hodges understands what their caws mean, and knows if it will be fine or wet by the way they go out in the morning from their rookery. I should like to know that kind of thing when I'm a man. I think Tor does, so perhaps I shall some day, for they all say I'm very like Tor."

"Well, if the rooks are right, we can go and begin school to-morrow—I mean Monday," said Bunny. "I should like some day to have a Sunday-school too—but we can't begin everything at once. Oh, Curly, I do hope I shall make a good schoolmaster! I should be so disappointed if I didn't."

## CHAPTER XV

THE rooks proved true prophets, and Monday saw both little brothers setting off for the old quarry together, their heads full of the project for turning the wild half-gipsy children of Curly's acquaintance into model scholars. If good-will and a hearty interest in their undertaking could have ensured success, that success should have been a brilliant one; but the little fellows were destined to meet with checks of which in their sanguine hopefulness they had never dreamed.

There was nothing very disappointing the first day, save that Bunny had a vague misgiving that everything was looked upon as a sort of new game. There was a keen competition for the possession of the alphabet-cards, but it was very plain that they would never stand a week of the handling to which they were immediately subjected by their unkempt and unwashed owners. It was an easy thing enough to get the whole "school" to roar out "A—B—C" after the youthful master, but getting the majority of the pupils to care one atom which of the

letters belonged to its name was quite another matter. Curly was fairly well satisfied, and distributed barley-sugar drops at the close of the hour with an air of approval; but Bunny had sundry misgivings which he tried to dismiss, both as to his own capacities as a teacher and the class of pupils selected on which to exercise his untrained powers.

A little talk with the intelligent Molly at the end, who lingered to ask for more detailed instruction than had been possible in the class, sent Bunny home encouraged; but he communicated to Curly his fear that the children were too wild and untaught to be much good as pupils. They weren't a bit like the children they saw in the school when Granny or Phyl took them to pay it a visit, and the mistresses there said that it was difficult sometimes even with them to keep order or make them attend.

"I know they're not a bit like our village children," answered Curly, "but I thought because they were gipsies and didn't know anything they would be all the gooder."

"Why?" asked Bunny, doubtfully.

Curly blushed and hesitated, and then said slowly, "Why, because of all the books, you know."

"What books?"

"Oh, you know the books that have stories in them about poor children—magazines, I think Hannah calls them. When she and the others were

taking care of you when you were ill they used to bring them and read them, and often I found the stories and read them too. It was always the worst children that were best—I mean, if it was a little boy or girl who had never been taught anything, and hadn't enough to eat, and everybody belonging to him had been wicked, he was sure to be much the goodest in the end, to want to learn and to like to hear about good things, and to be lots better than the others who had perhaps been brought up in a proper school like ours in the village. That's one reason why I thought it would be so nice to teach the gipsy children. I thought they'd be much nicer than the village children."

Bunny knitted his brows in perplexed thought.

"I read some of the stories too. I remember them now. Yes, it did seem as if the worst always turned into the best in them. And in missionary stories the little heathens and savages do get very good. I wonder if our gipsy children will? I didn't think of it like that before; but p'raps they will care more for not having heard much about things before."

Bunny put it vaguely, for he was not quite certain what kind of "things" he should begin to teach. There was a wide field before him when his pupils scarcely knew a single thing; but the very wideness of it constituted one of the difficulties, and the lack

of attention and gravity on the part of the wild children made it almost impossible to open or close school, as he had intended to do, by reading a few verses from his Testament to them. He felt certain that such words would have been worse than wasted to-day, and he had refrained from the attempt. Bunny had a good deal of reverence in his nature, which had been carefully fostered during his residence under his grandmother's roof. He did not like to court irreverence in others, and had felt that at present it was better simply to stick to the learning of the alphabet. If once his pupils arrived at something like a knowledge of their letters and could begin to pick out words for themselves, then it might be easy by means of large-print Testaments to get them to read and think for themselves, and instil a little knowledge into their heads.

Bunny had a very vague idea as to the time it took to learn to read. He and Curly had learned a long time ago, and very quickly, for their mother had taken the 'greatest pains with them in this matter. Bunny had a dim hope that in a week or two he should begin to see some result from his teaching; but experience was destined to show him that he had been decidedly over-sanguine on this point.

Days passed by, and on most days the little brothers plodded off to the quarry. They had a

great deal of liberty, and as this place lay in the direct route between Phyl's house and the Priory, some errand took them into the vicinity almost daily, even when they had not intended going.

But Bunny's experience of schooling was very different from what he had anticipated. The children soon ceased to care about coming when the first novelty had worn off. The carefully-written cards were all lost or torn up or hopelessly dirtied; the bigger boys would make mouths and openly deride the little brothers if they attempted to urge them to come and learn. Old granny laughed, and shook her head, and told them it was no manner of use trying to knock any sense into the heads of the "little varmint;" and though she freely offered to "whack" any boy who was rude or troublesome, her assistance went no farther than that.

Curly was woefully disappointed, and disposed to give everything up and go back entirely to their own pleasures and amusements with their animals and "farm," but Bunny was disposed to struggle on against all difficulties.

"If it is a responsibility of ours—it is," he would say; "and Molly and Peter would be sorry if we didn't come any more."

"If the 'sponsibilities won't do anything we tell them, and won't come to be taught, I don't see that we can do anything with them," answered Curly.

“If we’d taken the brown babies, it would have been much nicer, for then we should have had them at home, and we could have done as we liked with them; but it’s no good having a school when nobody comes to it. I think I’ll write a story, when I grow up, to say that it isn’t any good pretending these sort of children are always so good and so nice. They’re very wicked, and they don’t want to learn anything, and they make horrid faces and use bad words. I don’t think Granny would like us being so much here if she knew. I think it’s much nicer at home.”

“So do I,” answered Bunny with a little sigh; “but you know we do spend most of our time at home, Curly. We have done lots of things there already. It’s only about an hour that we come out to the quarry, and Molly and Peter do get on very well. They would miss their lessons very much.”

“Two isn’t a school—there isn’t anything for me to do,” objected Curly.

“Oh yes, there is—you help a great deal: you hear them read when I am setting their copies, and you read to them too, sometimes, and they like it very much.”

“But it didn’t ought to take two masters to teach two children,” answered Curly, who was in a perverse mood to-day. “If I had the baby-farm to

manage whilst you did the teaching, I should like it much better. I like babies—'specially those two brown ones, and I'd take all the 'sponsibility of them if we had them. Two 'sponsibilities wouldn't be a bit too much for me; and you could have the other two—Molly and Peter."

The intelligence and thirst for knowledge in Molly and Peter formed the one bright spot in Bunny's life just now. The school scheme had proved a lamentable failure—as any older person would have foreseen from the first; but these two children, by nature keen and intelligent—children who had profited from time to time on former occasions by opportunities of obtaining a few weeks or months of schooling,—proved the bright exceptions to the rule, and were quite as eager to learn as Bunny was to teach.

Molly had set her heart on recovering her lost accomplishment of reading before Pat returned, so that she might have a surprise in store for him. Peter, who was Molly's professed friend and champion in the camp, was a boy better born than some of his comrades, and had had a good mother and been educated with tolerable regularity up till the time of her death (when his father cast in his lot with the travelling tinkers), so that learning came pretty easy to him, and he had sense to know that it might be of great advantage to him

later on if he could acquire the art of reading and writing.

Bunny found real satisfaction in teaching these pupils, for it seemed to him that they got on very fast—quite as fast as any of the wonderful children he and Curly had read about in story-books. As a matter of fact, when knowledge has only to be recalled to memory and not actually instilled, the task of the teacher is wonderfully lightened. Molly and Peter had both been able to read at an earlier period of their lives, and Peter had been able to write, though Molly had never got farther than straight strokes and pot-hooks. Still she had some notion of holding a pen, and some of the most difficult rudiments of the art had been mastered. Her delight in her own performances, and her resolution to catch up to Peter, acted upon her like a goad, and a great part of her time was spent in trying to form letters and words upon the soft sand which lay about the base of the quarry.

But what really pleased Bunny even more than this was the eager interest taken by both the pupils, but especially by Molly, in the story of the New Testament, a large-print copy of which he had purchased for each of his pupils.

At first Bunny had been terribly scandalised by the apparently hopeless ignorance of the pair; but as he came to know them better, he discovered that

this seeming ignorance was partly due to the lack of the power of expression, partly to a species of shyness and diffidence upon their part. When he began to tell the story of Christ's life, he discovered that some few leading facts in the history were known to his listeners, and even—though very dimly—understood.

Molly said that Pat had told them most of what they knew—she talked very much of Pat whenever any sacred subject was the theme. Pat had told them the story, though presumably in an involved and not too comprehensible fashion. Still it was something that they knew it at all; and as soon as Molly was able to read with anything like ease, she simply devoured her one book, and was always coming to Bunny to explain the meaning of hard words or phrases. Bunny was not certain that she took it all quite seriously enough. It was not that she was troubled by any doubts—on the contrary, she eagerly assimilated anything that was told her, and seemed to think that the very fact of seeing it all down in a printed book was guarantee sufficient for anything. But her way of talking of Christ and His disciples and His words and works upon earth was a good deal more free and easy than anything to which Bunny had been accustomed; and when she proceeded to remark, one day, that “Peter was a real skunk” because he had denied the Lord, Bunny

felt rather as if somebody had hit him in the face.

However, he had the sense to know that Molly could not be expected to look at things quite as he did ; and certainly discussing the holy narrative in the matter-of-fact way in which Molly and Peter did helped Bunny to feel its reality as he had hardly done before. He had always believed everything because everybody did believe the Bible, but it had not seemed quite as real as what he read in history or story-books ; whilst to his pupils it was all the history and story they had ever read, and every detail was as real to them as if they had seen it all with their own eyes.

Wherefore Bunny and Curly began to understand in time that it was possible to learn lessons from the poor degraded children in the gipsy camp, and to see that after all there might be some truth and sense in the stories they had read of other children in like case ; although perhaps there are rather too many of such stories put in the way of little folks nowadays, and they are disposed in consequence to take rather upside-down views of the world and its inhabitants.

Then the children had plenty of natural and ordinary occupations as well, and the quarry and its gipsy-like people only occupied a small part of their time. Their farm and their pets required daily

supervision at this time of year. They had hens sitting on eggs, young chickens just out of the shell who wanted daily and almost hourly care as to feeding and so on, whilst Bunny had to learn to ride so as to be equal to Curly in this new accomplishment, and Phyl and Tor often had them across to the manor-house to spend a day, where the baby proved a source of continual interest, especially to Curly, whose mind was less occupied with the "responsibilities" in regard to Molly and Peter with which Bunny sometimes felt himself particularly concerned.

The children kept their secret about these people rather from the natural reticence of childhood than from any particular desire after secrecy. They felt that they had made a considerable failure, and that people would be sure to laugh at them if they heard the whole story. Nobody troubled them with many questions about their day's work. Granny liked them to have liberty, and the genial weather and out-door life were making a new man of Bunny. If the boys were missing from the Priory, they were supposed to be at the manor-house; and Lady Chesterton had wholesome ideas of teaching children to be moderately independent, and saw no reason to trouble the little fellows to give an account of every hour of their day. She was satisfied that they were diligent in their self-imposed duties upon their little

piece of land, that they improved themselves in their riding and driving, and were kind to their creatures and interested in their well-being. More than this she did not seek to know. What they chose to tell her she listened to with kindly interest; what they kept back they were welcome to keep. All that had been demanded of them was to keep out of conscious mischief and wrong-doing: and by the open faces and fearless looks of both children, she was satisfied that this rule was being observed.

“Phyl,” said Curly one day, rather suddenly, “do you like your baby very much?”

Phyl was sitting under one of the big trees in her garden, and Curly was squatting on the ground beside her. He had walked over to see her, and Bunny was to follow on the pony, calling upon his pupils as he did so. The white bundle which went by the name of the baby was sprawling upon the grass not far away. It was perfect summer weather, and people were talking of beginning to cut the hay. The little boys were looking forward greatly to this most enchanting season of the year.

“Yes, Curly, I like him very much.”

“As much as you expected to?”

“Yes, quite as much, I think.”

Curly sat ruminating for a few minutes, and then said tentatively, with one of his quick, upward looks,

“Don’t you think he’ll want a companion when he gets a little bigger? It would be very dull to have nobody to play with.”

“Would it? Well, perhaps it would.”

“I’m sure it would, because I’ve tried. It was very dull when Bunny was ill. It is ever so much nicer being two than one. I don’t think you’ll make him happy if you don’t give him a companion.”

Phyl laughed softly.

“Well, we must think about it, Curly.”

“Yes, you’d better. I know people always have to think about it before they buy expensive things; but I expect you’ll find you’ll want a companion for him—or perhaps two.”

Curly put out this gentle feeler, thinking of the two nice brown babies he was growing so fond of. They *were* nice little fat, merry things—much more amusing and pretty (though he wouldn’t for the world vex Phyl by saying so) than the plump pink bundle out there.

Curly had been cultivating those babies assiduously of late. He hadn’t much to do with the schooling, and the other children did not attract him. The boys made mouths at him and called him “A—B—C,” and Curly had an objection to being ridiculed which most children share. The girls were almost ruder than the boys, and they all used bad

words the meaning of which Curly did not understand. He had once asked Hannah what "Blast my eyes" meant; but she had been so shocked at hearing such a phrase from his lips that he had never repeated another, and tried not to hear them or wonder about them.

But the babies could not talk, and there were no bad words to be heard from them. They knew him quite well, and would laugh and coo when he came, stretching out their chubby little arms and pulling at his bright hair or at his sailor-buttons, and making much of him in the half-painful, half-pleasant way common to babies, but gradually working their way into the very warmest place in Curly's warm little heart.

And sometimes as he had sat playing with them, rolling them gently down a warm grass slope and carrying them up again one by one in his arms, or sitting in the shade waiting for Bunny, and talking to them whilst they sat meditatively sucking their thumbs, it had occurred to Curly with more and more force that it was a dreadful pity for these nice little brown babies, who were quite good and loving now, to grow up into horrid, rude boys, who fought and swore at one another and would not learn or be good or care for anything except their own idle, mischievous ways. Something of the deep sympathy and compassion which rises up at times in

every human heart, as we see the countless thousands of our fellow-creatures born and reared in almost hopeless misery and degradation, stirred in a vague way the heart of the little boy. He felt as though it would be such a great thing to save only these two babies from the life that seemed to lie before them, and yet so far he had not put the thought into words or even tried to communicate it to Bunny. It was easier to talk to Phyl than to anybody else about babies.

And to-day it had occurred to him, if only Phyl would take them and let them be brothers to little Tor, how nice it would be for them all. Phyl would make them so happy, and Tor—big Tor—was always so kind and merry, no home could be nicer than this one. It seemed to Curly that three little boys all pretty much the same age would be quite the nicest sort of family to have; and Curly felt very sure that he could have these brown babies almost for the asking, and if Phyl liked them very much, he would give them to her for nothing.

Curly had achieved an unexpected and unlooked-for triumph in a partial conquest of the virago mother of the brown babies. He had not known that she observed his partiality for her children, and of the woman herself he stood in considerable awe. He had heard from Molly of her prowess with the rod. He had heard that she had been known to

stand up against the men of the company and fight them like a fury when her temper was up. This had made him keep very carefully out of her way, so far as he could ; but little by little she had come to talk to him and to notice him, and certainly Curly had no reason to complain of the way she treated him. She spoke better than old granny, and was easier to understand. Her brown face was very handsome, and when she did smile, Curly thought she looked quite pleasant, though her frown was a very ugly one. Yet though she had spoken quite civilly and even kindly to Curly, he did not think she cared much for the brown babies. She had almost owned once to him that they were a great trouble when they were moving about. There were plenty of other children without them, even at her house. And Molly had said that the babies were often beaten for being in the way.

All this seemed very favourable to Curly's dawning plan of making them over to Phyl. As he sat looking at the white bundle on the lawn, the whole plan seemed to unfold itself before him, and his eyes glistened brightly.

It would be Phyl's birthday soon. Phyl and Tor had birthdays very near together, and kept them on the same day. Curly remembered that day very well, for last year they spent it at the manor-house, in the hay-fields, and they had been asked to come

again this year and do the same. There would be a strawberry tea again, no doubt, and all sorts of nice things. Bunny and Curly had been discussing what they should give to their big brother and Phyl for a birthday present, but now Curly saw it all: they would give them the brown babies, and it should be a surprise—even Granny should know nothing at all about it. They would get the babies over a day or two before, and keep them in the hut and feed them on milk and soft biscuit, and let them play in the sun just as they did at the quarry; and then on the right day they should be wrapped up into big bundles and driven over in the pony-cart, and there would be one for Phyl and one for Tor—and it would be the most delightful surprise.

Bunny had not cared much about having a baby-farm, and Curly had ceased lately to talk about it; but this idea could not but delight him, it was so obviously the best thing for everybody. Phyl and Tor would soon want playfellows for their baby, only Tor would think it too expensive to buy any more: but to have them for a birthday present would be such a surprise. Curly almost laughed aloud as he thought of it. He lifted his bright face to Phyl and said,

“I think you are very fond of babies, aren't you?”

“Well, I think I am. I used not to care much for them, but I have learnt better now.”

“And Tor is fond of them too?”

Phyl laughed again, that happy little laugh of hers that Curly liked to hear, without knowing why.

“Tor is ridiculously fond of his own—which is as much as can be expected of him, I think.”

And Curly nodded his head and felt completely satisfied.

“It will be just the very thing,” he said to himself, drawing a deep breath of satisfaction. “I wonder I did not think of it before. I must talk to Bunny about it this very night. I’m sure he *must* like this plan.”

## CHAPTER XVI

“PAT has come back! Pat has come back!”

These words were breathlessly uttered by Molly as she sped through the wood towards the two little brothers, who were paying one of their frequent visits to their pupils. The brown-faced girl had plainly been on the watch for them, and as soon as she had heard the sound of approaching voices, she came speeding along at full tilt, shouting out this piece of news with great eagerness.

“Pat has come back—he is at the huts now.”

Bunny was quite interested to hear this. He had always thought he should like the Pat of whom Molly was so fond of talking, and the girl's own excitement was infectious, too.

“When did he come?” asked both the little brothers in a breath.

“Last night.”

“What made him come?”

“He was took ill in the hay-fields, and nobody wouldn't keep him, so father brought him back in

a cart; but he went off hisself this morning before it was fair light. Sure but I'm afraid it's ill that Pat is; but I'll take care of him and make him well, if I can."

"What does your mother say about it?" asked Curly, shrewdly, for he knew something of the reputation of the virago.

Molly's expressive face changed quickly.

"Mother? Oh, she will have naught to say to him. She will not have him in our hut. She says he may bring the fever with him and give it to us all. So he's gone to old granny's—to that little back place behind her hut. Granny is better to him than mother. Maybe she will look after him of a night if he wants anything, and I can take care of him by day. Sure but it will be pleased to see you that he'll be. His face smiled all over this mornin' when I read him some of the verses out of my book."

"I'll come and see him directly," said Bunny, greatly interested; "I'll read to him too, if he would like."

"Faith but he would like it an' no mistake," answered Molly, her eyes all aglow. "He got me to leave the Howly Book with him—not as he can read himself scarce a word, but he liked to feel it near him, he did."

"I know that feeling," answered Bunny, with a

thoughtful look. "I liked my books near me when I was ill, when I couldn't read them."

"Is Pat very good?" asked Curly, gravely; and Molly nodded her head, whilst something of wistfulness crept into her eyes.

"Sure and I think he's the best boy as ever drew breath—saving your honours' selves," she answered. "He's not a bit like the rest of the boys, an' they all laugh at him and call him names; but he's a hundred times better than they are—you'll see that yourselves, I'll warrant."

All this while the three children were walking towards the quarry, and soon the hot sunshine glinted in through the tall pine-stems, showing that the clearing was at hand.

Granny's hut was rather better than some of the others, and had an offshoot in the form of a rough lean-to, in which in the days of the quarry-men wood or coal might have been stored. It was a rickety place at best, and there were great seams in the roof through which the light glinted through; but in this hot weather these dilapidated conditions were of small consequence, and the fact that the place had no door seemed rather an advantage than otherwise. Molly eagerly led the way, and the little brothers followed. There, sure enough, lying on an old straw mattress in most dilapidated condition, with a bundle of fern beneath his head, lay the stranger

brother whom they had come to see—a tall, gaunt, emaciated figure with hollow, sunken features and white, wasted hands. It hardly needed an experienced eye to see that the youth was stricken for death. Bunny stopped short in dismay, not certain if the closed eyelids would ever raise themselves again, whilst Curly surveyed the prostrate figure with grave concern, and then turned to Molly, saying in a tone of remonstrance,

“He looks a lot iller than Bunny ever did. You ought to go and get a doctor for him.”

But the sound of voices—soft voices, not those of the rude boys and squalling children playing outside—roused the patient from his semi-slumber, and his eyes flashed open at once. Then his face changed and brightened, and the lad made an effort to sit up, smiling at the small intruders with that flashing bright smile which Molly shared with him, as he said in very Irish accent,

“The top of the morning to you, little masters. Sure these must be the blessed children you told me about, Molly Mavourneen.”

“Yes; they’ve come to see you, Pat. I told you they would come—I knew they would. And they can teach you to read out of the Blessed Book, if you like. They taught Peter and me very quick.”

“Faith it’s too late for myself to learn now,” said

Pat, sinking back upon his rude pillow with an air of exhaustion; "but I'd be proud and happy to hear the blessed words read to me. They go out of my head so fast, and there isn't anybody now to tell me them."

"I'll read to you as much as you like," answered Bunny. "I'm sorry you're so ill, Pat. Have you ever seen a doctor?"

"Sure and I have—and many of them, too; but it's nothing that the doctors can do for me. It's the consumption that has got hold on me, and they can't cure that, not the very best of them. I've been in good places before now, and rarely good folks have been to me; but, bedad, to cure me is more than they can do, even the best of them. And it's glad I am that they can't. I'd sooner be gone, now, than stay, and that's the truth."

"Pat, Pat, don't say that!" cried Molly, throwing herself down beside him and taking his wasted hand in hers. "I'd made such plans for us to be happy together. What will I do if you go away and leave me?"

Pat touched her head with his thin fingers.

"Sure ye'll be betther off without me than with me, acushla; it's only a trouble and a bother that I am. I thought maybe with the warm weather I'd be able to do a bit of work and make a matter of money to please your mother. But it's little I

can do at all at all, and the hay-field did for me entirely."

"But sure you needn't go and die, Pat," cried Molly in an accent that was half pleading, half coaxing; "I'll nurse ye and make ye well again, and we might go away together then, and keep house for one another."

"I'd not be much good at that, Molly, me darlint. 'Tis better as it is. The blessed saints will maybe speak for me, and it won't be long before I'm took safe home. I'd rather be there, where I can rest. I'm so very tired with all the trouble and the burden."

As he spoke, he put out his hand and touched the little book which Molly had left with him on the coverlet.

"It's all in there—about the blessed city and the gold and the pearl. I'm afraid to think about being took in there—it's too beautiful for the likes of me; but sure there might be some little quiet corner, somewhere far away, where I might lay me down and rest. The holy saints and the Blessed Virgin maybe will speak a word for me. I'm a poor, ignorant boy, that I am; but they was once poor themselves, some of them, so maybe they will understand."

Bunny sat down on the edge of the bed, looking very grave; whilst Curly, who felt the conversation

getting a little beyond him, stole quietly off to improve his acquaintance with the brown babies. Bunny got the Testament into his own hands, and looking full at Pat, he said,

“There isn’t anybody that understands so well as Jesus Himself, Pat—that’s partly why He came to live here: for He did live as well as die for us. I don’t know much about the saints, except that they were very good and holy men; but it isn’t to them that we need pray. Don’t you know that God is our Father, and that He wants us to come to Him through His Son—that’s Jesus—not by any other way? There isn’t really any other way—only that one. And Jesus understands much better than they could; I’m quite sure of that.”

Pat’s eyes were very bright and eager.

“Sure and so I have heard good folks say, and it is blessed news if it be so. The good Chaplain in the hospital, he put it all as plain as could be; and there it all was in the Holy Book, as plain as poor folks could wish. But when my head gets weak I can’t seem to lay hold on it; and then I think of what I used to hear in the ould country about the blessed saints and the Holy Virgin. But faith it’s better to go to the Lord Himself, if one can be sure that He hears us.”

“He always hears us,” answered Bunny, gravely; “I’m quite sure of that. I’ll find you some places

about it. I'm not very clever at finding places, but I'm sure I can find some."

" Blessings on your head!" murmured the warm-hearted Irish lad, as he lay gazing eagerly at his small visitor. " Sure I might know that somebody hears us, for I was asking all these past days for somebody to read to me and mind me of what I'd forgotten."

Bunny was a very good reader, and he was tolerably well acquainted with the various Gospel narratives. He was able without much difficulty to find the various passages which Pat asked for—the stories of the prodigal son or lost sheep, and that other story of the Passion and death of the Lord.

Pat lay breathing heavily and with some difficulty, but bright-eyed and keenly attentive. He asked many questions, which led to discussions such as Bunny loved, and in which he bore out his character of teacher with great credit. He was never afraid or ashamed to say he did not know if he found himself out of his depth; but during these past two years he had been carefully though unostentatiously taught, and Pat's questions were generally of the simplest.

The Irish lad had all the devoutness and eager faith of his race, and was untrammelled by any difficulties as to differences of creed. In his early life he had been under Roman Catholic influences, but had

imbibed little beyond a deeper reverence for holy things than is usually found amongst those of his class in England. During later years such teaching as he had received at all had been from the chaplains of hospitals or infirmaries, and from them he had learned to trust himself to Christ without the mediation of any other saint however holy: only that, as his mind grew feeble with the wasting of his body, the old beliefs and traditions would assert themselves and leave him a trifle uncertain and hazy. But Bunny had no deeply-rooted convictions on such points to cope with, and no subtle forms of doubt to encounter. Pat was just thirsty for all he could get of the Holy Book, delighting in hearing familiar passages again, and keenly attentive when anything new was being told him.

Bunny came every day to see his new charge, generally carrying a basket containing soup or jelly or some nourishing dainty for the invalid, which did much to keep alive that flickering flame of life. It was easy to get some such delicacy from Granny's kitchen when it was for a sick person. Granny had so many sick folks on her visiting-list that Cookie asked no questions of the little boys when they came stealing into her hospitable regions with some modest demand. They had good things of their own, too, which they could often spare to give away: and Pat declared that it was better than any

hospital he had ever been in ; for he loved the fresh air of the pine wood and the sight of the sunshine streaming in at the open door, whilst he had as many dainties to eat as ever his feeble appetite craved, as well as Molly to perform any little loving offices of nurse, and daily visits from the little gentlemen, who were already regarded with a species of reverential love.

Bunny spent his leisure evening-time in printing texts on large pieces of card-board, and pinning them up where Pat could see them. The texts were done with a brush in bright colours and large letters all capitals ; and when they had once been read over to him, Pat could spell them through to himself as he lay. And great was his delight as the rude little shanty where he lay became gradually covered with "blessed words," which caught his eye whichever way he turned them. He did not know how to be proud enough of the appearance his room presented.

"Sure and it's a palace ye'll make of it entirely," he said, as an unusually brilliant specimen of Bunny's manufacture went up one day. "I'll scarce know meself soon, I'll be so smartened up and fine."

For an old dressing-jacket had been begged of Hannah, one day, by the little brothers, for "a nice boy they went to see sometimes ;" and as Molly

had begun to keep her own hair and his in a much tidier state, it was small wonder that Pat felt himself uplifted both physically and mentally.

Bunny began to entertain hopes that he might get better. He was growing used to his gaunt thinness and emaciation, and the nourishing food was having some effect in bringing a look of greater strength to the wan face. Molly was very hopeful about her brother, though Pat never talked about going anywhere but "home." Bunny was not altogether sure that it would be an advantage to him to get well any more. They talked and read so much about the golden city and its many mansions that Bunny began to realise its glories and happiness in a way that was quite new; and he rather in his heart agreed with Pat that it would be a happier thing to go there than to awake to the old life of hardship and sickness and want.

Whilst serious thoughts such as these were exercising Bunny's mind and developing him in one direction, Curly was still as full as ever of his plan of rescuing the brown babies from their present life of poverty and hardship, and making them over to Tor and Phyl as the most acceptable of birthday presents that could be devised. Something of the seriousness which had come over Bunny had reflected itself in the mind of his little brother. Culry did not enter so much as Bunny did into Pat's

feelings and his state of mind, but he did begin to realise that there were people who lived very wretched lives—lives that seemed to make them ignorant and wicked: and there was something deeper than the mere desire to give his big brother and Phyl a surprise in his increasing desire to become the proud possessor of the brown babies.

He began in a very guarded way to unfold his plan to Bunny, not very confident at first how it would be received. Bunny just at this time was a good deal absorbed, and his thoughts were greatly engrossed with Pat, so that there were moments when Curly's words fell on inattentive ears, and when the two little brothers were talking at cross-purposes. It was so the first time Curly ventured to broach the subject, for ever since Bunny had discountenanced the idea of a baby-farm, Curly had been more cautious how he spoke of babies. But time was getting on. The birthday was drawing near. They had already been lamenting the lack of funds for buying a nice present (for their farm and their patient together made large inroads upon their money), and wondered if Phyl or Tor would expect anything of them.

Bunny was painting another of his card-texts, and Curly was rubbing his colours for him. After a considerable pause of silence, the younger boy remarked,

"Bunny, I don't think it's half such a nice thing to be a gipsy as I did at first."

"No; and I don't either."

"It seems as if it made people wicked—I mean, as if they mostly did grow up wicked."

Bunny shook his head gravely.

"That's just what Pat says. He says when they began travelling about with other men he got to use bad words directly. He says it is a bad life. I'm afraid it is, though it hasn't made him bad."

"He says he has been bad, you know," remarked Curly.

"Yes, and I suppose he knows best. I know he doesn't want to get better. He thinks it's best to die."

Curly drew his breath hard, as was his way when he was thinking at all earnestly.

"If he could get better, but be taken away to some nice place to live, that would be better still, I think."

"I'm afraid he would have no nice place to go to."

"No; but if he had, it would be better?"

"Yes, I suppose it would; but I don't know if he'd think any place so good as heaven."

"P'raps not; but they can't *all* die directly and go there," said Curly, resting his chin in the palm

of his hand and watching Bunny's brush. "It would be better for the rest of them to live in a good place instead of a bad one."

"Of course it would."

"And if anybody could help them to get there, I suppose they ought to do it?"

"Yes, I suppose they ought."

"Especially the babies who haven't got wicked yet?"

"I suppose it would be easier to begin with the babies. Perhaps some day we might do something like that ourselves, when we are bigger. Some people do lots of good, Hannah says."

"Would that be good?"

"Yes, I'm almost sure it would. If Pat had been taken away when he was a baby, perhaps he wouldn't be dying now. He would have been taken care of properly."

"Yes, like Phyl's baby is taken care of. I don't suppose he was ever taken care of a bit like that."

"I'm sure he wasn't; and he wasn't taught as Phyl's baby will be by-and-by. I don't think it's at all nice belonging to gipsy people. It isn't like what one fancies when one just sees them playing about on a common."

Curly nodded his head assentingly. He had felt that himself too, and was glad his brother approved the feeling.

"We might try and help the gipsy-babies some day," he said softly.

"Yes, perhaps we might."

Curly was so far encouraged that he might have said more; but at that moment Hannah appeared with the glasses of milk and slices of cake that formed the children's supper these long summer days, and the opportunity for speech was lost. However, Curly felt that he had safely broken ground, and that there would be no serious opposition on Bunny's part to his pet scheme. More than that he did not expect just yet.

Molly was the next person he took into his confidence (for time was getting on and he must really see about the matter seriously), and her black eyes opened in astonishment as she heard the proposition.

"But nobody wouldn't have them, little master," she said. "Babies are a power of trouble—that they be."

"But I know some people who do want them," answered Curly with an air of importance that would have amused a less respectful listener than Molly. "It's some very nice people indeed, and they would like another little boy or two to play with their own; and I thought directly of your brown babies, and how much nicer it would be for them to go there than to stay here."

“Why, of course it would,” answered Molly, with dilating eyes. This is a real bad place, this is, and our folks are bad too. I’d be glad enough to go away meself, if it weren’t for Pat. Faith the babies would be better off with any folks sooner than mother. She was in liquor yesterday and beat all the children, every one that didn’t get out of her way. She was wishing then she could be rid of them. It would be a foine thing for them to get took off.”

“They would have a nice home,” said Curly, eagerly, “and I should often see them; and if you liked, I’d write to you and tell you how they got on. But would your mother let me have them?”

“There’s no reckoning on mother,” answered Molly, gravely. “Some days she’s quiet-like and almost kind, and then she gets mad entirely and goes on like a wild thing. But if the folks really came and talked to her about it, maybe she’d give them up. I’m sure she grumbles often enough at all the mouths there are to feed.”

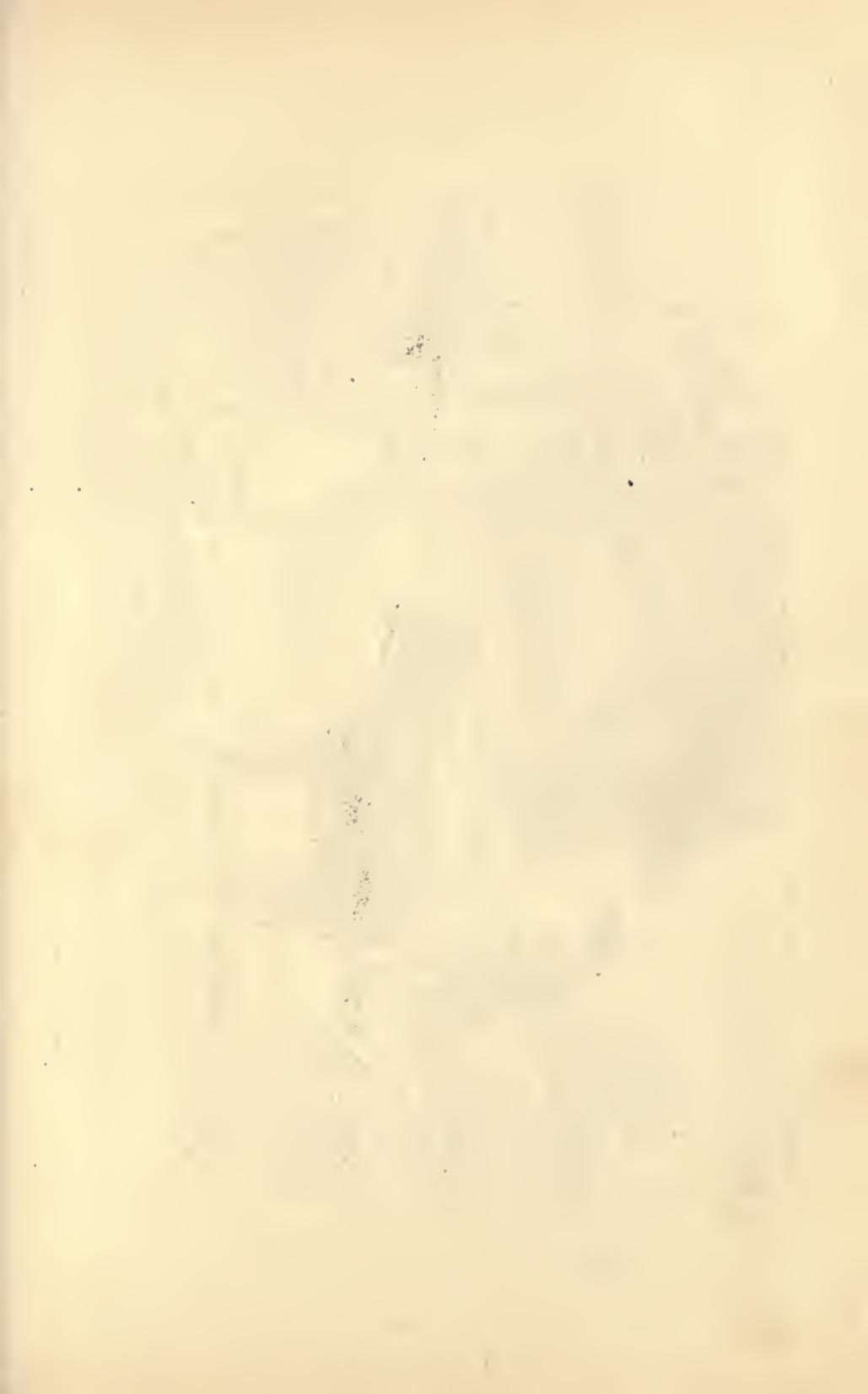
“Oh, but nobody will come—only me,” said Curly. “I want her to let me have them, and I shall give them to the people for a birthday present, you know.”

Molly’s eyes opened wider than ever, and bit by bit she drew from Curly all the story. It

was not at all like what she had expected, but her Irish blood fired at the thought of rescuing her little brothers from a life of misery and degradation and settling them in a beautiful, peaceful home like the one she heard described. Curly with the utmost good faith vowed solemnly that he *knew* the people would be delighted to have the brown babies as an addition to their family; and that being the case, Molly was only too delighted to aid and abet by every means in her power.

“We won’t speak to mother about it at all,” she said in an energetic whisper. “I’ll get the babies for you—why, if they were missing the whole day she would never trouble her head over them. You shall come for them, and I’ll meet you and give them to you; and then by-and-by, when she does ask, I’ll tell her that they’re being took care of by good folks, and she’ll be glad enough to be rid of them. What day will you come for them? I’ll have them clean washed and all ready. You can’t carry them yourself, they’re powerful heavy. How can you take them away?”

“I’ll bring the donkey in the cart!” cried Curly, excitedly. “Don’t say a word to anybody, Molly—not even to Pat or to my brother. I want it to be a great surprise. I’ll come on Wednesday





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at three o'clock. Bunny has a music-lesson then, so nothing will stop me. Thursday is the birthday, so that it will all fit in. They can live in our hut one night,—I'll have a bed of leaves all ready for them,—and the next day we'll take them over to Phyl and Tor."

To Curly's wild impatience it seemed as if the intervening days would never pass; but for all that, they did in due course, and there came a time when, with flushed face and a countenance of great absorption, he set off in the donkey-cart quite alone, and drove himself into the pine-wood over the uneven track which ran through.

How his heart beat as he approached the appointed place! But Molly had not disappointed him. There she was, and there were the two brown babies, looking unwontedly spruce and neat, holding out their arms and crowing lustily the moment that Curly appeared upon the scene.

"Here, take them, little master," cried Molly, eagerly, "for I can't stay. Lots of the children is took ill—I'm sure it's a mercy to have these out of the way. Mother told me to take them and keep them where Pat is, so she'll never miss them if they don't come back all night. She's busy looking after the others. Folks thinks it's measles as they've got. But these are all right and well, bless them. Kiss Molly and let her go. Good-

bye, little master ; Heaven bless ye for a kind heart ! Ye'll tell me one of these days if the good folks has took kind to the children."

Molly had to dash back to her busy mother. Curly laid his charges in the bottom of the cart, where the motion soon sent them off asleep, and with a heart swelling with pride and the joy of an achieved triumph, he drove slowly home to the paddock, with his live burden well concealed from all chance of prying eyes.

## CHAPTER XVII

“OH, Curly!”

“But, Bunny, aren't you pleased?”

“I—I don't know; it seems so queer. Curly, do you think you ought to have done it?”

“Oh, Bunny, yes,” was the eager answer. “They will be a beautiful present for Phyl and Tor, and Phyl will take care of them in her own nurseries with little Tor, and make them so happy. And they will grow up good then, not wild and naughty like the other children. Bunny,” and here Curly's face grew very red and very earnest, “I've felt for a long time as if those brown babies were 'sponsibilities of mine, and it didn't seem as if there could be a better way of doing it than giving them to Phyl and Tor.”

Bunny rumped up his hair in perplexed doubt, and stood gazing at the pair of kidnapped babies with a face of much bewilderment and compassion. The little brown creatures were eagerly sucking down large spoonfuls of bread and milk with which Curly was feeding them in quite a knowing way.

Their bright eyes, glowing cheeks, and firm, rounded brown limbs scantily clad in nondescript garments decidedly too small for them, made them quite a picture of infantine beauty. As they laughed and crowed in Curly's face, Bunny could not feel surprised at his brother's sense of affectionate ownership. Yet all the same, Bunny was not without misgivings on the subject. He had an idea that there was some very radical difference between babies and other live pets. He was not at all certain how Tor and Phyl would look upon the handsome present prepared for them, nor what Granny would say when she heard of it.

"Wasn't it rather like stealing them, Curly?"

The little boy's eyes opened wide.

"Oh no; Molly gave them to me. And I know their mother doesn't want them; she's told me lots of times that she has more than she knows what to do with. Granny said just the same—I mean old granny at the quarry. I know we may have them. And oh, Bunny, just think how happy they will be! I can't bear to think of them growing up wicked and using bad words, and perhaps stealing and lying like Molly says such lots of the gipsy children do. Oh, it's much better to take them away little, before they learn anything bad."

"Why, yes, all that's true enough," answered Bunny, thinking of the revelations Pat had made to

him about his life with the wandering tinker-folk, and the things he had seen and done. "Only somehow I think it would have been better to have asked Granny, or perhaps Hannah, first."

"Then it wouldn't have been a surprise: somebody would have let out about it," answered Curly, eagerly, "and I wanted it to be a great surprise."

"Yes, I suppose you did," answered Bunny, thoughtfully, but without any exuberant satisfaction in his tone.

"Birthday presents are *always* surprises—at least they ought to be," continued Curly, as he finished feeding his two small charges and got up and stood beside Bunny. "And one can't trust grown-ups not to tell each other. It's very queer they can't keep a secret, but I don't believe they can."

Bunny was looking gravely at the babies, now rolling delightedly on the warm soft grass of the paddock.

"What are you going to do with them to-night?" he asked.

Curly, with a smile of triumph, opened the door of the hut and showed a soft bed of dried fern and moss.

"They will sleep there," answered Curly. "It is a much nicer bed than any they have in the hut. And then to-morrow I'll give them a good wash,—Molly showed me how,—and I can dress them too,

because you see they don't have many clothes ; and then we'll put the pony in the cart and take them straight off to Phyl and Tor. I know they have lots of clothes there big enough, because the nurse is always sewing ; and when I asked Phyl what she did, she said that little Tor grew so fast they had to make bigger clothes for him ready when he wanted them. So the big things will just do for the brown babies. I thought of that when she said it."

"I—I don't quite know if Phyl will care about that," faltered Bunny, rather taken aback by the thoroughness with which his little brother had gone into this scheme ; but Curly was intent upon his own thoughts and did not heed. He was looking at the giggling twins at his feet with a look of fond pride in his eyes, and presently he shook back his wavy golden hair and said,

"I hope Phyl won't care less for little Tor when she has these brown babies too, for I shouldn't like little Tor to be any worse off, you know. But of course nobody could help seeing how much prettier these are than the one they chose. I don't want to be unkind to little Tor, but I don't think Phyl can help liking these the best. But she's so kind, I don't suppose she'll let him feel any difference."

Again Bunny rubbed his head reflectively.

"I expect she'll go on liking little Tor best," he said slowly.

“Do you think so? Why?”

“Oh, because she’s had him longest; and he’s her very own, you know.”

“But the brown babies will be her very own—at least one will be hers and one Tor’s,” answered Curly, eagerly. “But I dare say she’ll like them all alike soon, and that will be best of all. I should be very sorry if she got not to care so much for little Tor, because he’s really a nice baby; but of course he’s not half so interesting as these, nor so pretty.”

Bunny sighed. He rather wished Curly had not loaded them with these two new responsibilities. He did not like to damp his pleasure, but he felt as though there would be unexpected complications in store before the transfer of the gipsy children was actually accomplished. But his thoughts were not clear enough to be put into words.

“Well, I’m glad we have only to keep them till to-morrow, for I don’t think we know enough about babies, Curly—”

“I do,” interrupted that young gentleman, quickly, though speaking beneath his breath.

“—to take care of them long. And I don’t much like leaving them out here all night. If it rained or there was a thunder-storm, or they woke up and found themselves all alone in the dark, they might be very frightened. In the hut they have people

all round them. I don't think babies are ever left out in places like this alone."

Curly had not thought of this difficulty, and drew his breath hard.

"It's such a comfortable bed," he said; "I had a nap there myself the other day, and it's all beautifully dry. I knew they must not sleep on anything damp. Hannah says damp beds give folks their death sometimes."

"It isn't the bed, it's the loneliness," said Bunny. "Folks don't leave babies all night out-of-doors alone."

"Well, but what can we do?" asked Curly.

"I don't know."

"The little brothers stood looking at one another in perplexity, and then Curly's face brightened.

"I know."

"What?"

"Why, there's the old empty attic over our night-nursery; nobody ever goes there, and there's a bed in it—they can sleep there. It will be more convenient for washing and dressing them; and if we go up by the little staircase from the shrubbery, nobody will see us. After the gardeners have gone away there's never anybody about then. Come along."

Curly caught up one of the brown babies and gave it to Bunny, and then took up the other himself.

“We’d better go now. If it gets later, Hannah may come out to look for us. It’s almost time we went to bed ourselves.”

Bunny was still doubtful about the propriety of the scheme, but he saw that Curly’s whole heart was in it, and he began to catch some of his enthusiasm. He certainly did think that it would be a very good thing to rescue the two little innocent children from the life which lay before them, but he did not feel quite so sanguine as Curly of the reception the brown babies would meet with from Phyl and Tor. His slightly longer acquaintance with life had taught him that there were matters beyond his comprehension where grown-up persons were concerned. But still Curly might be right: he certainly knew more about babies than his brother, and was on slightly more confidential terms with Phyl.

At any rate, Bunny was quite sure that the babies ought not to be left all night alone in the hut in the paddock, and he was quite willing to take his own share in smuggling them into the house. Only, as the little pair of brothers pursued their way, panting under the weight of their burdens, a sudden misgiving struck Bunny; and he stopped short and laid his brown baby down, partly to wipe the heat-drops from his brow, partly to communicate to Curly the misgiving which had just assailed him.

“Suppose they should wake up in the night and cry?”

Curly followed Bunny's example of setting down his burden for a moment whilst he considered this suggestion, but he answered promptly and confidently,

“I don't believe they will. They never do cry.”

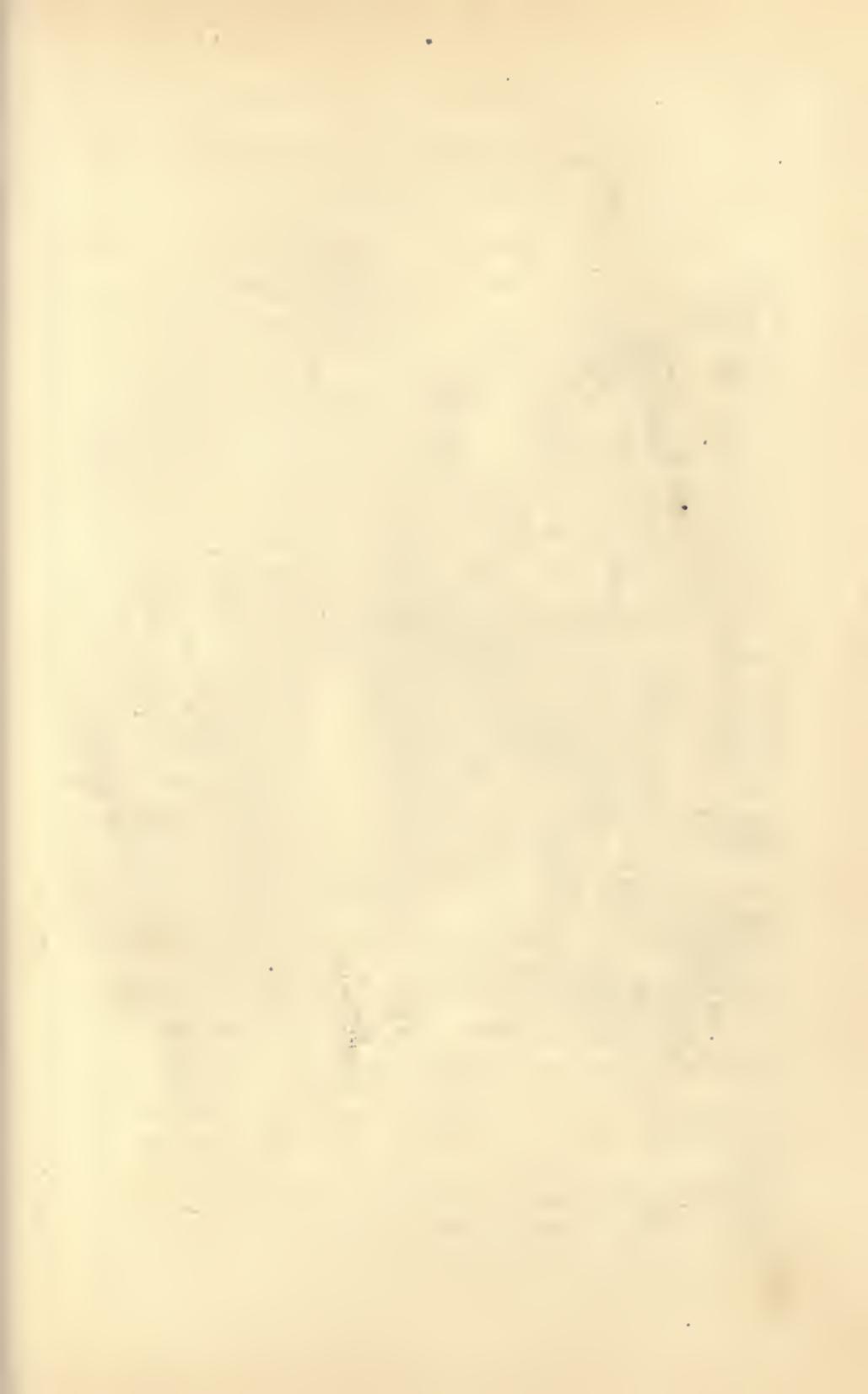
“Hannah would hear directly.”

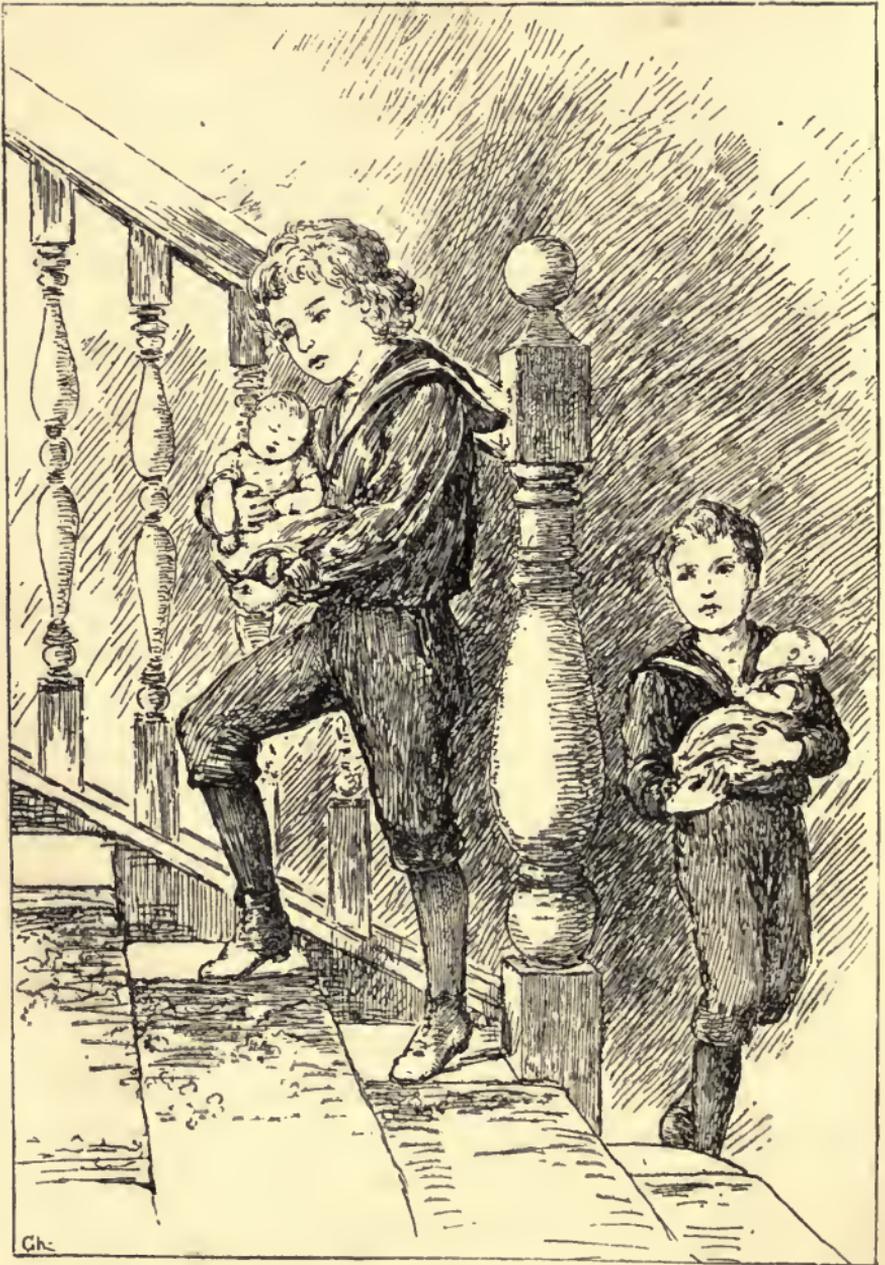
“I suppose she would; but I think Hannah might keep our secret. You see, after to-morrow it won't be a secret. Phil and Tor will have them then.”

“Well, we must see what they do, I suppose,” said Bunny, resuming his burden. And the transit of the brown babies to the attic was accomplished in safety and without molestation.

The Priory, being a queer old house, had several staircases of its own, and one of these, with a door leading out into the shrubbery at the back, was very much used by the children and very little by anybody else. It led more quickly to their own domain than any of the other doors or stairs, and they very seldom encountered any other person either in the shrubbery or on staircase or landing.

Certainly the attic when reached seemed to Bunny a very much better sleeping-place for babies than the hut in the paddock. As it was just under the roof, it was very warm and dry in summer, and there was plenty of bedding of all kinds, as well as





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odds and ends of furniture piled up in odd corners. When in old days the house had been full and the nursery-party a large one, this attic had been used as a supplementary sleeping-place, and had never been entirely dismantled.

So Curly was able to undress his precious babies, and wrap them in some clean and ancient infantile garments he routed out from an old press, and laid them in bed more luxuriously than they had ever been laid before in their lives. Weary with the journey and the excitement of the day, and soothed by the plentiful meal of which they had partaken, the babies sank off to sleep almost at once in a most satisfactory way. Curly looked at them with fond pride as he arranged the bedclothes about them.

"They aren't big enough to say their prayers yet, Bunny," he remarked: "let us say prayers for them—let's say ours here by them before we go down ourselves."

Bunny was quite ready to do this; and when the simple ceremony was completed, the little brothers slipped down to their own quarters, where Hannah was beginning to look for them, as their bedtime was already past.

"We've got such a nice present for Phil and Tor, to-morrow," said Curly, as he sat down to his milk and cake with a sigh of satisfaction. "We can't tell you what they are yet, because it's to be

a secret till to-morrow. But it'll be a great surprise, I'm almost sure of that. Bunny, you think it will be a surprise, don't you?"

"Yes, I think it will," answered Bunny, with his eyes on his plate.

"Well, no doubt it will be a very nice surprise," said old Hannah, fondly, "and a happy day you will have, I don't doubt, over at the manor-house. Her ladyship told me just now that Mr. Torwood and his lady would be over here early in the morning to see her, and that they would take you back with them to spend the afternoon at their house, so I'm to dress you in your best, first thing, to have you all ready when they come."

Bunny and Curly exchanged glances. This was not quite what they had expected, but perhaps it would do as well. The babies could be given almost as well here as at the manor-house, and then Granny would enjoy the surprise too. On the whole, perhaps it was the best thing that could have happened; for Bunny had a very decided feeling that if they were to be met on the morrow carrying off a pair of babies to present to Phyl and Tor, something would happen to frustrate the scheme; and now that they had really made a start, Bunny did not want it to be frustrated.

The little brothers slept restlessly that night. It was very hot for one thing, and, for another, they

felt some anxiety as to the behaviour of their little charges overhead. If they were to cry or to tumble out of bed, the sound might reach Hannah's ears; for Hannah slept beneath the attic, as far as they understood the locality of the place, and they were very anxious not to be forestalled in the grand *dénouement* of their delightful surprise.

Early rising was no unwonted thing with the little brothers, and so Hannah was not surprised to find them up and out before she appeared to call them in the morning. They had not, however, donned the best white sailor-suits laid out for them so carefully, but had put on their garden-blouses instead.

"Bless their little hearts, they were thoughtful enough not to go and mess their clean clothes. For boys, they be wonderful considering. I dare say, now, they've gone out to get Miss Phyl—I should say Mrs. Chesterton, bless her!—a birthday posy. They'll be as hungry as hunters when they come in, for sure. I'll get them something extra nice for breakfast, that I will, and they can dress themselves neat and clean afterwards."

The good soul hurried away to see to this matter, and when she returned, the little brothers were in their nursery, their faces very red, and Bunny's unwontedly grave and even perplexed, though neither spoke a word of their early doings, nor did

they seem to have that hearty appetite with which she had credited them.

The basons of bread-and-milk were but little patronised, though Curly kept his close to his plate, and would not let it be taken away even when he turned himself to the other dainties upon the table.

“I may want it presently,” he said, thinking Hannah meant to wrest it from him; at which she laughed and said that he would have better things than that by-and-by to eat. But he did not make any intelligible reply, and kept the bason jealously beside him.

She presently passed into the night-nursery, and the moment she was gone Curly took up the bread-and-milk and carried it carefully away, saying in a whisper to Bunny,

“You stay here. I’ll go and give them their breakfast. They’ll be all right when they’ve had it. Only you must be here lest Hannah comes back. Say I’ve gone to feed some of our things with my bread-and-milk.”

Bunny nodded, and Curly vanished and was gone some considerable time. When he reappeared, it was with a decidedly troubled face.

“They won’t eat it,” he said in a low voice, “they won’t look at it; and they only fret and whimper and then go off to sleep, and then wake up and cry a little. I never saw them a bit like that

before. I don't know what to do. I think they've got bad colds, too; their eyes and noses are red and damp, and their faces are red too—not brown, but red. I am so disappointed about it, for I wanted them to look their nicest for Phyl. And if they only whimper and cry, she won't know half what jolly little chaps they really are."

Bunny heaved a great sigh.

"I was afraid we didn't know how to manage babies," he said.

"But I do know—only they never used to be like this. I can't think what's come to them," answered Curly, aggrieved. "They used to be always laughing, and they would eat anything I gave them—and Molly said just the same. It is tiresome of them just to be so different now."

"P'raps they don't like being taken away," suggested Bunny, not knowing what else to say.

"I'm sure it's a much nicer place."

"Then it must be because we don't understand them. We never had babies to take care of before."

"Well, but Phyl knows; and she'll be here soon, and we'll give them to her. When she gets them, they will be all right directly. She can always make little Tor laugh and be good, even if he's roaring with anybody else."

"That'll be the best way," said Bunny, with a sigh

of relief, for he felt that the responsibility of the brown babies was a good deal too much for them to bear without farther advice and assistance; and just at that moment Hannah came hurrying into the room with a look of astonishment upon her face.

“What is it?” asked Curly, starting up, for a sudden fear had assailed him.

“Why, it may be nothing, dearies; but I thought I heard a queer noise overhead upstairs—for all the world as if there was something alive up there. I dare say it’s the cat—gone up after mice and got shut in, poor thing. I’ll go and let her out. I’m sure it was a bit of a cry of some kind.”

“Oh, I’ll go!” cried Curly, his face as red as a peony. “Don’t you come, Hannah; I’ll let puss out if she is shut up there.”

He ran to the door and was out in a moment, Hannah looking after him doubtfully, and then turning to Bunny, saying,

“You’re not keeping any live things up there, are you, honey?—for her ladyship wouldn’t like to have animals in the house. It’s one of the things she has set her face against always, and it isn’t right to break her rules.”

It was Bunny’s turn now to get red; he hesitated for a few seconds, and then said diffidently,

“It’s not animals exactly, and it’s only for one night. It’s the surprise we’ve got ready for Phyl

and Tor. When they come, we shall give them away. I shall be very glad." And Bunny heaved a sigh which told of some load upon his spirit.

Hannah's face, which had been overcast and anxious, now cleared up entirely.

"Oh, if it's only that, I don't mind—some new pet you've got to give away; but surely it's an animal, Master Bunny, my dear?—for I'm sure I heard it make a noise."

"Well," answered Bunny, who was speaking with great deliberation, "it's an animal in one way, because if it were dumb crambo we were playing, it would count as animal, because it's not vegetable or mineral; but they're not called animals when people talk about them—at least, not generally. Though to be sure Tor calls his a little animal, and a little beast, and a little kid."

The door of the nursery stood open, and just at this moment there issued from some upper region a most unmistakable and pronounced baby-yell, which was speedily followed by another, and that by a whole series of similar cries. Good Hannah stood for a moment as if petrified, and Bunny sprang to his feet aghast. He felt his shoulder held in a firm grasp as the astonished nurse gasped out,

"Master Bunny, my dear, you take my breath away. Tell me, for pity's sake, what you have got up there!"

"It's Curly's secret more than mine," answered Bunny. "It was he who thought of it and did it; but it will be a great surprise for Phyl and Tor. We have got two nice little brown gipsy-babies to give them, to be companions for little Tor when he is old enough to want to play."

"Dear heart alive, whatever will the mistress say!"

This remark was not addressed to Bunny, but seemed to escape from Hannah's lips naturally as she hurried past him to the door. All he could do was to follow as fast as he could, and being decidedly the quicker of the two, reached the attic first, slipping past her on the stairs and running forward to give the alarm.

"Curly, Curly, Hannah is coming!"

Curly turned a flushed and worried face towards his brother, and did not seem surprised at the news. The babies were not screaming now, but were moaning and sobbing under their breath.

"I don't know what to do with them," he said. "The moment I wanted to lift them up to dress them, they began to yell. I wouldn't have believed babies could be so—so—what old granny calls *contrairy*. Molly said they never cried unless they were beaten, and I'm sure I never hurt them. I wish Phyl would come and take them away; I'm quite tired of them already. I don't think 'spon-

sibilities are half as nice as I thought they would be."

Curly looked dreadfully put out and aggrieved. It seemed to him as though his young charges were behaving in an altogether outrageous manner, and he did not much care how soon he washed his hands of his responsibilities. It was almost a relief to see Hannah's portly figure in the doorway. It was only anticipating the surprise by a few hours, if as much. And perhaps she would be able to make these troublesome babies good again.

The look upon Hannah's face as she advanced into the attic was a study for a comic painter. Dismay, consternation, astonishment, bewilderment, all struggled there for mastery as she beheld the two babies lying upon the bed together, Curly standing beside them with a very red and disturbed face. There was, however, no shame or shrinking in the gaze that he turned upon his nurse, and he appealed to her with the greatest confidence and good faith.

"Oh, Hannah, *do* you understand babies?—for I don't think I do as well as I thought I did. We've got these two to give to Phyl and Tor, and they always used to laugh and crow, and to-day they won't do anything but cry and be naughty. Please make them good, and then we'll dress them ready. It's the surprise we've got for Phyl and Tor on

their birthday. Don't you think it's a very nice surprise?"

"Goodness gracious, Master Curly, my dear! wherever did you get them from?"

"Oh, from a horrid, cross woman, a sort of gipsy, who had lots of them—more than she wanted; and Molly said she was sure I might have these two. I don't want them to grow up wicked like the rest, and I know Phyl wants another baby to play with hers, only Tor thinks it too expensive to get her another just yet. So we've got two for a surprise. Don't you think it will be a great surprise?"

Hannah did not laugh—the laughing over the episode came later on; she was too confounded and bewildered by it all now to do anything but gasp and gape. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, she looked at the two children and motioned the boys back.

"The bairns are sick," she said at once. "Master Bunny, take Master Curly away to the nursery, and send word that I want to see Mrs. Blake up here, if she will be so good as to step this way. Where did these little creatures come from, and where is their own mother?"

"They came from the quarry—those huts where the gipsy people live," answered Curly, readily; "but it isn't any use wanting their mother, she

couldn't come—she's busy. Her other children have got the measles, and Molly said that's one reason why these won't ever be missed. She sent them away to live with Pat, because she was busy looking after the others. That's one reason why I got them so easily—just in time for the surprise."

## CHAPTER XVIII

CURLY nipped Bunny's hand tightly in his. His face was rather disturbed.

"What is it?" he asked. "Is she angry? Why did she send us away so quick?"

"I don't know—not exactly. I don't think she likes the babies, Curly. And I think she is rather frightened."

"What about?"

"I don't exactly know. Perhaps she is afraid what Granny may say. Oh, Curly, I'm afraid perhaps it was naughty to bring them away here."

Curly's face looked very serious.

"I didn't think it was naughty; I'd have told, if it hadn't been for a surprise. Bunny, if it's been naughty, let's go and tell Granny ourselves, now. I always promised I would if I did anything else naughty again."

Bunny looked down at their soiled blouses,—Curly's was well spattered with bread-and-milk,—and said,

"We must dress ourselves properly first. We can't go down to Granny like this."

“Come along, then,” cried Curly, eagerly. “All our nice things are put out ready. We sha’n’t be long, and Granny will be at breakfast. Come on.”

In a very short time the little brothers had effected a decided improvement in their personal appearance. Nothing could well have looked more spruce and attractive than the little pair of brothers in their clean, white sailor-suits, with their well-brushed hair and well-scrubbed hands and faces, as they made their way down the great staircase to the door of the dining-room. As they neared this, they heard the sound of a laugh—Tor’s unmistakable laugh—and Curly’s face kindled into an eager smile.

“I declare, they’ve come already; how nice!”

“It will be easier telling Granny when Tor is there,” added Bunny. “He always laughs, and Granny has to laugh too.”

“I don’t see that there’s anything to laugh at,” answered Curly, a little hurt. “But I’m glad Phyl will be there. She can say how much she wanted some more babies.”

Hand-in-hand the little brothers approached the door and opened it. There, on each side of the breakfast-table, sat Phyl and Tor, talking to each other unconcernedly enough. But the place behind the silver urn was vacant. Granny had evidently been summoned away, for it was plain she had been there by the look of her plate and cup.

Bunny and Curly ran eagerly forward.

“Many happy returns of the day, Phyl. Many happy returns of the day, Tor. Isn’t it a nice day for a birthday? And how early you’ve come!”

“Yes, we thought the drive would be pleasantest in the cool,” answered Phyl; and then the little brothers eagerly pounced upon some very pretty presents in silver that Granny had evidently just bestowed upon her favourites.

“Where is Granny?” asked Bunny.

“She was here just now, but Watkins came with a mysterious message which took her off somewhere. I wasn’t sure, but I thought I heard your names spoken, you young rascals. Have you been up to any fresh mischief, eh?”

“No,” answered Curly, stoutly, “it isn’t mischief at all. If it’s anything at all to do with us, I expect it’s about our surprise. We’ve got a surprise for you and Tor, Phyl—two surprises. If we’d known you were here, we’d have asked Hannah to let us bring them down to show you. You’ll like them *awfully*, I’m sure; won’t she, Bunny? But Hannah was so surprised that she sent us away, and Bunny thought perhaps we’d better come and tell Granny first—and that’s why we came. I expect Granny is having the surprise now. It will be your turn next. It seems as if you ought to have had it first”

Curly’s face was beaming. His courage was all

coming back. Now that the brown babies were almost Phyl's property, all his anxieties ceased. She would make them happy—she would make them good. There would be no more crying and fretting now. Everything would come right of itself.

Tor was looking in an amused way from Curly's beaming face to Bunny's flushed and doubtful one. He began to suspect the existence of some "mare's nest," as he called it in his own mind, and accordingly he began to ask questions.

"And what is this surprise?"

"It's your birthday present—yours and Phyl's. I thought of it. I knew just what you wanted."

"Well, and what is it? I'm dying of curiosity."

"It isn't one, it's two," answered Curly. "One for you each—though I expect Phyl will take care of them both mostly. They're exactly alike—at least I think you'll think so. I'm just beginning to know the difference, but Bunny doesn't a bit."

"But what are these mysterious objects?"

"Guess."

"You must give me a hint; I'm lost in wonder. Are they alive?"

"Oh yes, quite alive;" and Curly shifted from one foot to another in suppressed delight and excitement.

"Old or young?"

“Young—quite young, I think you’d call it.”

“Kittens, I suppose,” answered Tor. “Nasty little blind things with their eyes shut.”

“They aren’t kittens, and their eyes are as wide open as mine,” answered Curly, almost indignantly; “and they aren’t puppies either, or chickens. Now guess again.”

Bunny’s face was by this time crimson; he looked as apprehensive and uncomfortable as Curly looked triumphant. Phyl glanced at him and drew Curly towards her.

“Tor is very bad at guessing, Curly,” she said; “I think you had better tell him now.”

“It’s something I know you wanted very much,” said the child, with the prettiest little air of arch triumph imaginable. “Phyl will love them, I know, and so will little Tor when he grows up—I mean when he is old enough to want to play. Phyl, the surprise is two dear little brown babies—what people call twins.”

“WHAT?”

This one word broke from Tor in a tone that was almost a shout. Curly turned gravely to him and spoke in the same eager way.

“Two babies, Tor; such jolly little laughing babies! They’re prettier than little Tor; but we don’t want Phyl not to like him too when she gets the others, because he’s quite a nice baby, though

the brown ones are rather nicer, and I think you'll like them best. Shall I run and fetch them? You'd like to see them, wouldn't you?"

Phyl's face was buried in her pocket-handkerchief, and she seemed to be convulsed. Tor caught Curly by the arm as he was about to dart away, and asked in an odd, smothered voice,

"But look here, old chap, I don't understand. You don't mean that you've got a pair of babies here on the spot?"

"Oh, but we have," answered Curly, swelling with importance. "They're up in the attic over our nurseries. I brought them last night to be ready."

"But where in the world did you get them? Babies don't grow on hedges."

"Of course not," answered Curly, rather scandalised; "if they did they would not be expensive, and people could have as many as they liked without buying them. They came from the gipsy place by the quarries. There's a woman there who has plenty and didn't mind sending two away to a good home." Curly had heard this phrase used before with regard to the transfer of dogs and horses, and brought it out with pride. "I went for them yesterday evening, and they've been here all night."

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

Tor lay back in his chair as he uttered this mys-

terious phrase, and looked across at his wife. Then he burst into a sudden roar of laughter and said,

“I say, Phyl, your pair of originals have justified their name at last with a vengeance. Oh, I’d have given anything in the world for a sight of her ladyship’s face when she was first confronted with the surprise.”

Curly stood at Phyl’s side, looking from one to the other in a growing perplexity. Why did Tor laugh, and why did Phyl look so queer? They did not seem vexed, and they did seem surprised—but not quite in the way the child had expected. And then, before anything more could be said, the door opened to admit Granny, who came in with a very peculiar expression upon her face.

“Oh, the boys are here,” she said. “I was wishing to see them. Have they been telling you, my dear, of the very wonderful present they have been preparing for you?”

“We’ve told them, Granny,” answered Curly, “but I don’t think they quite believe us—you see it is such a surprise. Perhaps if you say it’s true they will believe it then.”

“The present, my dear Phyl,” said Lady Chesterton, with an odd little quiver in her voice, “seems to be two very brown little gipsy children some nine or ten months old—with the measles well out upon them.”

“O Jerusalem!” breathed Tor, softly. “No wonder their mother was so glad to part with them!”

“The measles!” echoed Phyl with momentary dismay, fearing the danger of infection to her own baby at home; whilst Curly looked up eagerly to say,

“I didn’t know they had the measles—I’m sure they didn’t have it yesterday. I suppose they got it when they turned into ’sponsibilities. Hannah did say something once about measles being like ’sponsibilities, but I didn’t understand what she meant before.”

This very lucid remark passed unheeded. Granny had returned to her seat, and had called the two little boys to her.

“I want to know all about this business of the babies, my dears, and you must tell me the whole story, without keeping anything back. I do not think you intended any harm, and I am not displeased with you. But it is not usual to take other people’s children away in that fashion, even to make surprise presents of them afterwards. So I must hear all about it before I can decide what must be done next.”

Bunny and Curly had no wish to conceal anything. Bit by bit it all came out, one little brother helping the other so as to make one consecutive tale. First the wonder as to responsibilities which

they thought they ought to begin to have now, then the belief on Bunny's part that his responsibilities must lie in teaching ignorant children, whilst Curly could not get it out of his head that they were somehow bound up in babies, and so he had begun cultivating the acquaintance of the brown pair who had been at last triumphantly kidnapped.

Bunny told the whole story of the proposed school and its lamentable failure with great humility and frankness; but this brought him to the history of Molly and Pat, whilst it gave Curly his opportunity of explaining to Granny and Phyl his hopes that by giving away these brown babies to a good home he would be saving them from a life of misery and vice and degradation. Not that the little boy used any such fine words. What he said was couched in very simple language. But there was great earnestness in his look all the while, and his eyes swam in sudden tears once as he pleaded for the little creatures he had hoped to rescue and befriend. And Granny's face did not look at all stern as the tale proceeded, though it was quite grave and serious. Tor, who had laughed a good deal over the first part of the narrative, was grave now, whilst Phyl leaned forward and drew Curly towards her to kiss him as she said,

“We will certainly see what we can do for the

little brown babies, Curly. I should not like them to grow up wicked either."

Tor rose to his feet and said,

"Well, I think the first thing is for me to go across and interview this outraged virago, who seems to have been robbed of her young in a decidedly peculiar fashion. I shall be able to find out from the people there how far these youngsters are right in what they say, and we'll see whether anything can be done for that lad, who appears, by what the boys say, to be dying fast. They seem to be on your property, Granny; so I suppose you will wish the thing looked into more or less."

"Certainly I should. Poor things! if they have illness there, we must see what can be done for them. Those roving folks are a great nuisance; I wish they did not exist. But if we can't put a stop to their vagrant ways, at least we can't let them die like dogs at our very doors. Go and inquire into the thing, Tor, and let me know. The two babies here have been taken to Widow White's cottage that stands all alone. She will take care of them till they are well again. I do not imagine hardy children like them will have it badly. I only hope these small philanthropists will not develop it later on."

Tor swung himself off without more ado, whilst

Curly looked from Phyl's face to Granny's, and asked,

"What is he going to do?"

"To tell the babies' mother where they are, and that we will take care of them till they are well; and then, if she wishes it, they must go back to her."

Curly's face fell sadly.

"Go back to her and grow up bad! Oh, Granny, can't Phyl and Tor have them? I'm sure the woman would give them to them if they asked. I believe she'd give them to me, and I'd give them to them."

Granny smiled her quiet smile, and laid her hand upon the child's curls as she spoke.

"My dear little man, when you are older and wiser, you will understand as you hardly can do now, that it is neither wise nor right to take upon our shoulders responsibilities that do not belong to us, unless they are sent to us in a very unmistakable way. You are quite right in thinking that babies are a great responsibility, and also that, as we grow older, responsibilities do fall upon us that we have to carry about with us, whether we like them or not. But we do not go about seeking for them, and trying to get hold of other people's and making them our own. I know you meant it kindly—I am not going to say a single word of blame. I

only caution you for the future to take the advice, another time, of some older people before you try to take upon yourself responsibilities that they have not given you. If you had asked Hannah about the babies, she would have told you that it would not be wise to take them away, and a good deal of trouble would have been spared."

Curly's lip was quivering. It was kind of Granny not to be cross—he quite felt that, now that he realised (without understanding why) that his pet scheme had turned out a failure; but those nice brown babies whom he loved so very much, must they really go back to that fierce woman who beat them, and grow up wild and wicked like the rest of the children of the camp? He could not help it—the tears would come, the disappointment was so very keen.

But Phyl seemed to divine what was troubling him—Phyl, who was so kind and good, and so fond of babies herself. Her arm was round him in a moment, and she was whispering sweet words in his ear.

"Never mind, Curly darling, we will see what can be done for the little brown babies as soon as they are well again. I cannot quite adopt them, as you thought, for I find one little baby boy quite as much responsibility as I can manage just now. But I love the little brown babies, too; and I think it is very sweet and dear of you to care for them;

and I should be just as sorry as you if they were sent back to be beaten and made naughty. So we will think very hard what must be done about them. Granny is very kind—she does many more kind things than anybody knows, and there are nice homes where little waifs can be taken in and brought up honest and good men and women, and Granny has the right to nominate children from time to time to be sent there. You know that I have plenty of money of my own, too—more than Tor and I and little Tor want for ourselves; and if the mother of the brown babies will let us, perhaps we can think of a plan by which they can be sent to some nice place, and saved from the wandering life poor Molly and Pat have found so bad. At least, darling, we will see what can be done, so do not cry any more. It was a very nice birthday present you tried to give us, and it has all been a great surprise—quite as big a surprise as ever you could have expected. And if things don't turn out quite as you thought, you must not mind; and I'm sure we shall all feel that we have some responsibility in those brown babies, and I feel certain that they will be the gainers by what you did for them yesterday."

Curly was greatly consoled as he heard these words. The tears were dry upon his cheek, and he looked up at Phyl with his beaming smile.

"You are nice," he said caressingly; "I always said I knew you would understand."

"I ought to understand about babies, ought I not, as I have got such a spoiled specimen of my own?" said the young mother, with a bright light in her eyes. "I would go and see these two remarkable infants, only I am afraid I might carry the measles to my own little Tor if I did."

"But you'll go some day? I should like you to see them. Do you like them brown or white best?"

"Well, I think a variety is nice; it would be dull if all babies were *quite* alike. Some people think they are, as it is; but you and I know better."

Curly was quite happy again now, and Bunny was greatly relieved to have the explanation over. He had felt grave misgivings all along, though he had not liked to damp Curly's ardour. He had felt very doubtful as to the success of the scheme, and was glad that nothing worse had come of it. Nobody had been angry; and though plainly this importation of babies with the measles had entailed a good deal of trouble and expense upon other people, Granny had been very kind about it, and had only bidden them not act on their own judgment again, but take counsel with older people, as Bunny felt now it might have been better to do all along.

Tor returned in about an hour, as they were sitting out in the garden under the shade of a

big tree. He came and lay down on the grass beside the children, and tumbled Curly over in unceremonious fashion enough.

“Well, you young scrapegrace, I’ve had hard work to appease your virago and buy her off from bringing an action against your small person for unlawful kidnapping of her offspring. The fun of it was, she had not even missed them till I apprised her of the fact, and then she flew into a fine tantrum, and I don’t know what she wasn’t going to do to the person who had dared to touch her blessed babies. Prison would be far too good. Hanging was the least they deserved.”

Curly stared with all his eyes. Bunny looked rather scared.

“What a stupid, bad woman!” cried the former. “She’s told me about a hundred times she didn’t know what to do with her children. Of course I shouldn’t have taken them if she’d wanted them—Molly said just the same.”

“She can’t hurt Curly really, can she?” asked Bunny, anxiously—“not if the babies are sent back?”

“That appears to be about the last thing the virago really wants,” answered Tor, laughing. “As soon as I endeavoured to appease her by saying that the children should be returned that very day, if she wished it, or should be nursed through

the measles and sent back afterwards, whichever she preferred, she waxed more and more furious. Though half the children in the camp are down with measles, she had the face to tell me that it was the 'little gentleman as stole the babies as had given them the disease,' and she went on to say that them as had took 'em might keep 'em; she wasn't going to be treated so—to have her children took away and then flung back just like as if they were bales of goods. She would have the law on the whole lot of us, that she would. She wasn't going to be treated so—not she; no fear." And his mimicry of the angry woman was so perfect that Curly, who had heard the woman blustering in like fashion before, could not but laugh aloud.

"Well, what did you settle?" asked Phyl.

"I did not exactly settle anything, but pacified her by a gift of a sovereign, and told her that some arrangement satisfactory to all parties should be arranged later on; and then I went to see the boy—that friend of yours, Bunny."

"Pat? Oh, I'm glad you went to see him. Wasn't he very much pleased to see you?"

"He'd have been more pleased if it had been somebody else, I think," answered Tor, laughing, "but I did as a substitute. Poor chap! something must be done for him, Granny. He's dying fast, I should say, and in a place I wouldn't put a sick

hound to sleep in. It's wonderfully decorated with Bunny's handiwork; but a good heavy thunder-storm, such as we might get any day, this sultry weather, would pretty well wash the whole place away with him in it."

"He likes it better than hospital, he says," said Bunny, eagerly. "He likes to see the sky and hear the birds and all that kind of thing, you know. He's been used to be out of doors all his life."

"Well, there's certainly no trouble about seeing the sky anywhere in that place," answered Tor, smiling; "and it's all very well for him, as long as you play the part of ravens and bring him food every day. But with measles raging there, that sort of thing must stop; and how is he to get looked after then, eh?"

"I'm not afraid of the measles," answered Bunny, stoutly. "I believe we've had them—the girls would know."

"All the same, you won't go backwards and forwards there at will, young man," answered Tor, laughing, "or I don't know Granny. Now you two shrimps run off for a bit, whilst we elders discuss the situation. You're too knowing by half. We do better without you in our counsels."

The children went away hand-in-hand, in obedience partly to Tor's words, partly to a sign from

their grandmother. As they went, Curly heaved a big sigh and said,

“It isn’t a bit like what I fancied; but I think it’s going to come right, somehow. Phyl was very nice about the brown babies; and I don’t quite know how it is, but I think I’m rather glad that I’ve got the ’sponsibility of them off my hands now. I’m not very much surprised that Phyl finds little Tor enough for her. When they were both crying together, and I couldn’t make them understand me, or do anything I wanted, I did feel as if ’sponsibilities were not quite as nice as I’d thought they were going to be.”

## CHAPTER XIX

"I'M glad we're going home to-morrow, Bunny," said Curly.

"So am I," answered Bunny; "though this is a nice place, and it's been great fun having the sea to bathe in."

"Yes, but I like being at Granny's best: and there's the farm to see to. I don't like being away from the animals. I know Hodges will take care of them, but I like doing it all ourselves best."

"Yes, so do I, Curly; I think perhaps our animals and our farm and our lessons, and things like that, are our responsibilities, and I shall like getting back to them, too."

Curly's eyes opened wide with interest; he looked questioningly at Bunny, who continued speaking slowly and gravely.

"I asked Granny about responsibilities, and she said that they were the things that we were answerable for—the things that belonged to us and that we were accountable for. Sometimes they're alive

and sometimes they're not. I don't know if I can explain, but when she was talking I thought I understood. We are partly responsible for ourselves, Curly: Granny said that that was the first responsibility we had to think of—to be able to answer for our own conduct, to give an account of our words and deeds, not to her exactly, but to God—at least, I'm almost sure she meant that."

Curly drew his breath hard. The idea was new, but his mind was prepared to receive it, and he was much interested.

"I didn't know I was a 'sponsibility to myself, but I don't think I mind," he said; "I think it might help me to remember things. And what about the animals, Bunny?"

"Everything we have is a sort of responsibility," answered Bunny. "Everything we have which we ought to take care of is one. If we didn't feed our animals, or water our flowers, so that they died, we should be responsible. And if we wouldn't learn our lessons when we were properly taught, so that we grew up dunces, we should be responsible for that. But if people bigger than us, like papa or Granny, didn't send us to people to be taught when we were little, and we grew up dunces because we couldn't help it, then *they* would be responsible, not we."

"Did Granny say all that?"

"Yes—when I wanted to know how lessons could

be responsibilities. She said it better than I can, but I think that's what she meant. When we're here, Hodges has the responsibility of our farm, and if anything happened it wouldn't be our fault; but when we go back, then we shall have the responsibility again, and if we are lazy or careless and things go wrong it will be our fault. Children don't have so many responsibilities as grown-up people, because they don't have so many things depending on them; but Granny said that if we didn't learn to take up our little responsibilities when we were little, we might very likely not take up our big ones when we got big. That is why, when she gives us things for the farm, she is always so particular that we shall take care of them ourselves, and why she only gave us our lease when she saw that we had worked hard and taken pains and she thought it would encourage us to let us have it for our own."

"I see," said Curly, drawing a long breath. "Well, I'm glad that we do have some 'sponsibilities of our own, and I'm rather glad it isn't those brown babies after all. Bunny, do you know what has been done about them? Have they gone back to their mother and the gipsies?"

"I don't know, Curly; perhaps we shall know when we get home."

"I wonder if that's anything to do with the surprise. Bunny, I'm almost sure there is going to be

a surprise when we do get home. Hannah almost let it out that there was one."

"Yes, I know she has something she won't tell us. Well, to-morrow we shall find it all out."

This conversation took place as the little brothers sat together on the sands in a pretty little secluded hamlet close beside the sea. They had been there three weeks with Hannah, and to-morrow were to return to the Priory. It was mainly on Bunny's account that they had come. Sea-air was recommended by the doctor for him, and it had seemed as though a change of scene would do him good just about this time.

Bunny had been a good deal upset and troubled by the death of Pat, which had taken place shortly after his removal from the hut in the quarry to a comfortable cottage where he had been placed by Lady Chesterton. Bunny had visited him daily; and although he had known that the lad would die, he had been a good deal overcome when the time came, and this had been an additional reason for sending him away. The sea-breezes and salt water had done much to invigorate his frame and bring back strength and colour, and his mind had recovered its usual tone. Pat had been so happy to leave a world which had had little of sweetness in it for him that Bunny soon grew reconciled to the thought of him at rest in the far-away land of light

and peace. He was beginning now to look and to talk more in his old fashion again. Of late he had grown almost too serious for his years, and Curly was relieved to find that his playmate was not altogether translated into a real "grown-up."

This last week had been a very merry one, and the thought of going home was of course delightful. The little brothers agreed that they had had a very nice time, and hoped they might come again to the sea another year. They had made a good many friends amongst the "fishy men," as Curly had dubbed them; and though they were sometimes a little seasick when taken out in their boats to sea,—Bunny especially,—yet they greatly enjoyed the novelty of the experience, and were never daunted by any qualms from a repetition of the entertainment.

They had been making a round of farewell visits to all their friends that very day, and now were just waiting the call from Hannah to say that tea was ready. The house they lodged in was so close to the shore that these yellow sands seemed to belong to them almost as much as the garden at home.

One of Curly's chief objects in desiring to return to the Priory was to ascertain what had been the fate of the brown babies. Hannah either did not know or she would not tell him. When he had

left they had still been at Widow White's, and had been recovering from the measles there. He was neither allowed to see them, nor to go to the quarry to talk to Molly. His questions had not received any satisfactory answers, and of late Hannah had become both obscure and oracular whenever the subject had been named. Curly had a shrewd suspicion that there was some surprise in store for him in regard to these babies on his return home. He could not help feeling a personal interest in their destiny, and was by no means certain that he was not in some measure responsible for their well-being. If it had not been for him, as he could not fail to see, they would have been left to the tender mercies of their virago mother. If some better fate should be in store for them, it would be in a certain sense the outcome of his own action. Not that Curly wished to take to himself the credit of the matter. He felt that he had been very mercifully treated in not getting a round rebuke for interfering with other children, especially when they had the measles, which had been a decided complication in the case. He was very humble about his own share in the transaction, but he did very much hope that Granny or Phyl, who were both so kind, would think of some plan by which the brown babies might be saved from the fate of the ordinary gipsy child.

And now the very day had come when perhaps this mystery would be solved. Soon they were at the familiar station, and then driving along the well-known road. Coachman had welcomed them with broad grins of delight, and Curly was standing up in the carriage to ask him half-a-dozen questions about the pony, the donkey, the live-stock generally, from which he felt he had been separated nearly a twelvemonth. Then almost everybody they met upon the road had to be acknowledged as they bowled rapidly along, and Curly, sinking back into his seat at last, fanned himself with his cap and said,

“Yes, it’s very nice to be home again” (the little brothers had long given to the Priory the name of home, to the exclusion of any other place), “but it makes one very hot and thirsty. I hope tea will be ready by the time we get there.”

“Suppose you stop at the dairy and ask for a drink of milk there, and then run home across the field,” suggested Hannah, with a broad smile upon her face. The idea was pleasant to Curly, who was growing tired of the monotony of travelling; but Bunny looked up to say doubtfully,

“But isn’t there a new woman at the dairy? Didn’t Betty get married just after we went away? I know Granny was looking out for somebody else to take her place. If it’s a new woman, she

won't know us, and perhaps she won't give us the milk."

"Oh, I think she will, if you say where you belong," answered Hannah; "and I think you'll find somebody there that you know. I've been away myself, so I don't know everything; but I'm sure you could get your milk there, dearies."

That was quite assurance enough, and Curly gave the order for the carriage to be stopped at the dairy, which was about half a mile by road from the Priory, though only a quarter across the fields by the foot-path. The little brothers sprang gaily out, and waving their hats to Hannah, declared they would be at home almost as soon as she was; then taking each other by the hand, they ran up the familiar flagged walk to the cool, clean dairy with its rose-covered cottage beneath the same roof, and came face to face round a sharp corner with—Molly.

But what a different Molly from the old one! Curly fairly gasped with astonishment as he met the unmistakable dancing light of those merry dark eyes. This was a Molly neat and trim, in a nice print frock, with a short mop of curly hair that was well brushed and combed, and as tidy as its rebellious nature would allow. The beaming face was as clean as the frock and the hair, and the smile was sunshine itself.

“Molly!” cried both children in a breath.  
“Molly, what are you doing here?”

“Sure and it’s meself that is at home here,” answered Molly, glowing and dimpling with delight. “It’s me aunt—father’s sister—that has got the place of dairy-woman to her ladyship. You saw her once, little masters, when she came to see poor Pat. Well, when it came out that she had had the best dairy in the ould country, and had kept it years and years until the old lord died and the family changed and went away, faith if her ladyship didn’t say she would try her here: and it’s beautiful butter we make, though I say it. And I’m here to help her clean and scour—bless me, what a deal of cleaning a dairy does want, to be sure! And I look after the babies, too—your babies, little master. Would you like to see them, the dears? Aunt Norah she loves them like her own, and wouldn’t have them go back to the other folks, not for worlds. And father said if she would take them and bring them up, he would work hard and pay her all he could, and her ladyship has been just as kind as kind. Poor father was terrible cut up when Pat died, though sure he must have known it was coming. He was right glad to let me come to Aunt Norah, and the babies too; and mother she made no manner of trouble about it. And Aunt Norah is a real good one

and says she'd like the whole lot of us, as far as that goes—”

But Curly stayed to hear no more, for he had heard a familiar sound, and had darted off to find the brown babies rolling over and over in a little patch of sunlight which lay softly upon the bit of grass beside the cottage, whilst a woman whose face he just remembered to have seen before sat at work with one eye upon the vagaries of the little ones.

The next minute Curly was rolling beside them, renewing acquaintance in his own fashion, whilst the dark-eyed Irishwoman, in voluble terms and with a rich and not unmusical brogue, was pouring out a long history into his half-attentive ears, interspersing it with a hundred tender expletives addressed partly to him and partly to the brown babies, who evidently regarded her as an immense improvement upon their own mother.

No arrangement could have been more perfectly satisfactory and delightful. The children were not with strangers, but with a near relation who had a heart warm with love for them, and who claimed the right to adopt her brother's babies as her own if he was willing to let her do so. Molly was well worth her keep, for she was a strong, active girl, and was fast learning to be invaluable to her aunt, who would have required some assist-

ance with her dairy-work. Lady Chesterton had secured the services of a thoroughly capable woman, and Norah's butter was admitted on all hands to be the best the Priory had ever known.

The little boys drank their milk, listening eagerly to the voluble Irish talk of Norah, which Molly was fast learning to imitate, and then, with a happy, lingering look at the little family party, the brothers took hands and scampered across the fields together as fast as their legs would carry them.

"Isn't it nice?" panted Curly, as they reached the familiar gate by which the garden could be entered, and swung themselves over to plunge through the shrubberies and so to the lawns and flower-garden surrounding the house. Generally they kept to their own more secluded paths, but to-day they knew they would be privileged to go and seek Granny wherever she was. Most likely she would be out on the terrace having her tea; and there they proceeded to look for her, Curly beaming and brimming over with delight, whilst Bunny agreed heartily that it was the nicest thing that could possibly have happened.

"There they are!" cried Curly, waving his hat excitedly. "There's Granny; and she's got Phyl and Tor with her, too."

"So she has. How jolly! Perhaps they are staying with her whilst we are away."

“Perhaps they have come to see us. I don’t care which it is, but it’s awfully nice to see them all again.”

Flushed and hot and panting, but infinitely happy, the little brothers dashed onward, and almost flung themselves into Granny’s arms, they were really so pleased to see her again. The greeting they received was none the less affectionate from its being a little stately, and Phyl and Tor seemed almost as pleased to have the children back as they were to be there. And it was plain that they were expected to drink tea with the elders as a special privilege, and there was a nice little table set with piles of strawberries upon it and a jug of rich cream. There were the cakes, too, which Cookie well knew were their especial favourites. And in a very few minutes the little brothers were discussing this luxurious tea and eagerly asking and telling the news, but fuller than anything of the delightful surprise which had met them up at the dairy, and the excellent way in which everything had been arranged.

“Without your valuable assistance,” chimed in Tor. “Yes, that was the most wonderful part of it all—how ever we came to think of anything so good without that head-piece of yours, Curly. I can assure you I felt the responsibility of my position when I had not you to come to for advice and

assistance. I am glad your lordship approves what has been done."

Curly blushed, as he often did, whilst Phyl chimed in merrily,

"I won't have my pair of originals teased any more about their responsibilities. They made us a very delightful present, I am sure, on our birthday, and it's quite right we should have settled something satisfactory with regard to it."

Curly looked up quickly, the flush still upon his face, his golden curls shining very brightly in the sun—a perfect picture of glowing, childish beauty.

"I've heard people say that before, but I don't know what it means. What are 'originals'?—Are they anything like 'responsibilities'?"

"Ask Granny," suggested Tor, whilst he and Phyl both laughed, and Curly turned his flushed face towards the stately old lady, who was regarding him with a smile which was more tender than she perhaps knew.

"My dear little boys," she answered gravely, but very kindly, "you need not trouble your heads over long words and ideas almost too big for them. If my pair of originals has entailed upon me some unexpected responsibilities too, I have been very willing to undertake them, and I shall look in the days to come to reap my reward."

Bunny's eyes met hers with a quick look of what

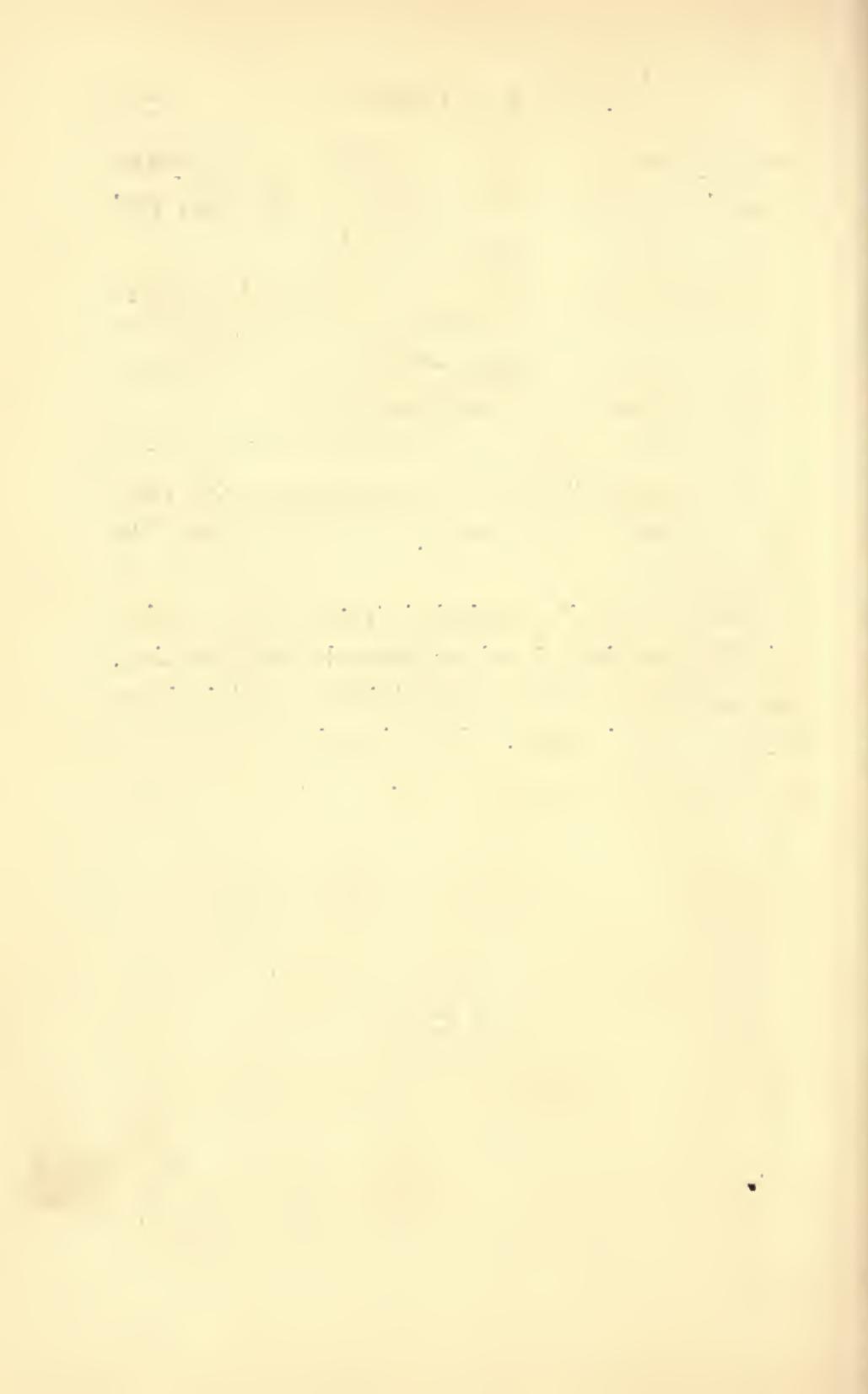
was very like comprehension. Taking Curly by the hand, he approached the stately old lady, and lifting his face for a kiss, he said,

“Granny dear, indeed we do know how very, very good you have alway been to us, and we will try hard to please you always. We do mean to be as good as ever we know how.”

“And more nobody could expect of you, my dears,” answered Granny, stooping to kiss each face in turn. “And now you can run away to Hannah.”

“Who knows,” concluded Tor’s lazy, teasing voice, as the little brothers obeyed this injunction, “as much about the responsibility of originals as anybody else in the world, I imagine.”

THE END.



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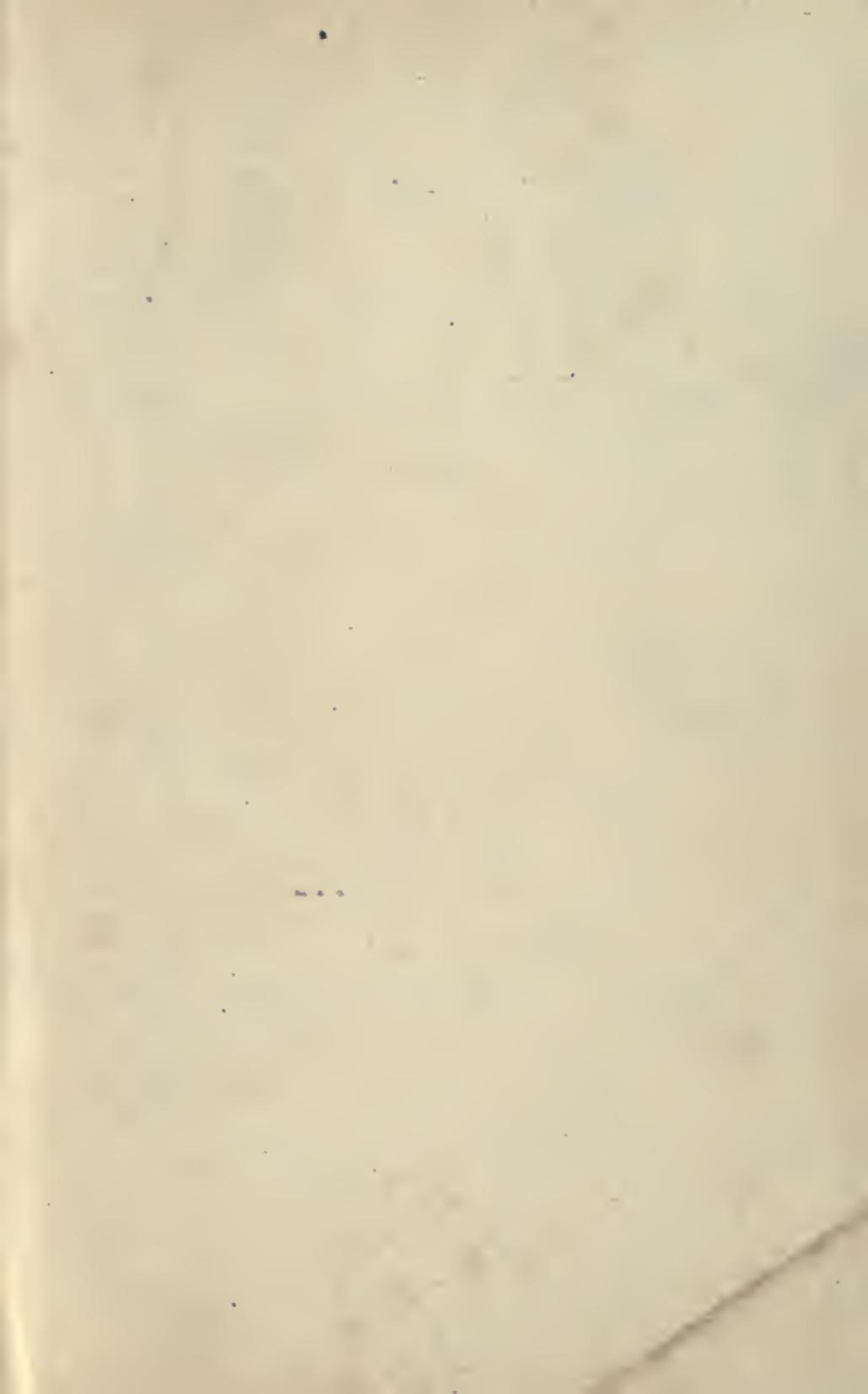


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